BARRON IXELL: CRIME BREAKER

OSCAR SCHISGALL

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BARRON IXELL

CRIME BREAKER

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BARRON IXELL
CRIME BREAKER

BY

OSCAR SCHISGALL

LONGMANS, GREEN AND CO.
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SCHISGALL

BARRON IXELL : CRIME BREAKER

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BY OSCAR SCHISGALL

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CONTENTS

BOOK		PAGE
I.	*Bruxelles:* The Circle of Terror	3
II.	*Paris:* The Devil's Pigeons	81
III.	*Berlin:* The King of Crime	171
IV.	*Geneva:* Follow the Red Line!	259

BOOK I — BRUXELLES

THE CIRCLE OF TERROR

THE CIRCLE OF TERROR

CHAPTER I

THE BUNGLE

AS the newspaper was placed on the desk before him, Monsieur Vaudebain, Minister of Police, struggled quite desperately to suppress his chagrin. A heavily freighted oath, a most unministerial oath, was yearning to burst through the barrier of his tight-set lips, but he crushed it back and glanced at the man who had presented *Le Nouveau Temps* — glanced rather testily, at first, as if he wished the fellow would have the good sense to withdraw; and then rather balefully, for it was evident that the clerk had no such intentions.

Deep in his throat Monsieur Vaudebain grunted. Tactless imbeciles, every one of these attendants! Scowling, he adjusted his gold-rimmed pince-nez and leaned forward. One hand slowly stroked the length of his square grey beard — a bristling beard as sharply cornered as those of the Pharaohs — while his gaze hung on the headline of the newspaper. There it lay, that disturbing news, in the very centre of the front page, and its words seemed to sneer up at him, mocking the efficiency of his administration.

For some thirty seconds he stared at the paper; and in that half minute his anger welled to proportions he could no longer control. The oath finally escaped him — between his teeth — so that when he jerked up his head to glare at the clerk, he found the man properly shocked.

"How," snapped Monsieur Vaudebain, "did this get into the papers ?"

Stiffened and perhaps frightened by the Minister's irascible tone, the attendant elevated brows, shoulders, and hands in a single gesture.

"But I do not know, monsieur !" he protested.

"I demand to know" — each syllable leapt from Monsieur Vaudebain's lips like a shot at the confused clerk — "who is responsible for it !"

The cheeks of the unhappy man flushed a vivid red. Unaccustomed to the virulent sting of the Minister's wrath, he allowed his dismay to force him into wretched confusion. With his hands as much as with his spluttering voice he assured Monsieur Vaudebain that he was wholly ignorant of the channel through which the article had reached *Le Nouveau Temps*. Indeed, he himself had been unaware of the matter reported in the paper until reading it a few minutes ago. That was why he had rushed it to the desk of his superior; he had felt certain Monsieur Vaudebain would be interested to learn . . .

When at last an impatient expletive silenced him, he drew a long, grateful breath. An instant the Minister of Police considered, frowning at the offensive paper; then, curtly, he waved the clerk away.

"Send me Lecour and Fragmont!"

Alone again in the privacy of his office, Monsieur Vaudebain bent over *Le Nouveau Temps* with an expression as scathing as he sometimes flashed upon stubborn criminals. To him, in that moment, the newspaper appeared to be a stain on the brilliant polish of his black desk. He eyed the headline with an anger that seemed to blaze through the glasses of his pince-nez:

BARRON IXELL, AMERICAN CRIMINOLOGIST,
TO ARRIVE IN BRUXELLES TODAY

"That information," muttered Monsieur Vaudebain, "is the result of either a bungle or a pernicious betrayal in this office! Whoever told——" He ended with another of those effective ejaculations which frequently horrified his staff and resumed his reading of the startling item:

The office of the Minister of Police reported this morning that Mr. Barron Ixell, the American expert in criminal research, would arrive in Bruxelles today.

He is expected in Antwerp at eleven, on the SS. *Stateland* from New York, and will proceed immediately to present himself at the Ministry.

It is understood, though not offically confirmed, that Mr. Ixell comes at the invitation of the authorities to study the recent atrocities committed by the amazing and elusive "Circle of Terror."

Monsieur Vaudebain's intent perusal of the item was interrupted by a knock at the door — a timorous knock. For whenever his humor wandered into unpleasant lanes, a sense of the fact somehow pervaded the entire

Ministry, leaving it low-voiced, timid, apprehensive. He uttered a sharp "Enter !" and turned in his chair to confront the two under-secretaries, Lecour and Fragmont, who uneasily shuffled into his presence.

With a sweep of his arm he whipped the newspaper toward them. And after Lecour had hesitantly accepted it, the Minister pointed a rigid finger at the disturbing article.

"Which one of you two gentlemen gave out that news ?"

Together they read the headline and simultaneously caught their breaths. Their eyes widened in wonder as they gazed first at each other, then at Monsieur Vaudebain. And he, after some seconds of severe listening to bewildered expostulations, gathered that neither of them had communicated the news to *Le Nouveau Temps.*

With deliberate slowness the Minister of Police removed the pince-nez from his nose — a movement many an unfortunate criminal had learned to recognize as the preface to a searching, merciless investigation.

"Gentlemen," he said quietly, "only three people knew that Mr. Ixell was to arrive today. You, Monsieur Lecour; you, Monsieur Fragmont; and I. We also knew, we three, that Mr. Ixell had requested us to keep the matter of his coming absolutely secret. And until this morning it *was* kept secret. The problem which now confronts us is: who informed *Le Nouveau Temps ?"* He paused, darting an acute, inquisitorial look at each of the men. *"I* did not. Both

of you assure me that you did not. Then — who did ?"

There was an uncomfortable silence oddly surcharged with an air of suspicion. Monsieur Vaudebain ended it by nodding toward the telephone on his desk.

"Monsieur Fragmont," he directed, "be good enough to call *Le Nouveau Temps*. Ask them how they obtained their information. Speak to Chanlion himself, please."

The under-secretary obeyed with an eagerness that clearly indicated his own anxiety to unravel the situation. And presently he was in earnest conversation with Chanlion — Monsieur Eugène Chanlion, editor as well as owner of *Le Nouveau Temps*. His inquiries brought a most perplexing and astonishing result. Turning to the Minister, the telephone still at his ear, he whispered in apologetic alarm:

"But he says the news was given his paper by — Monsieur Lecour !"

At that, Lecour emitted a little cry of incredulity, even of pain, and stepped back. A glow came into his sunken, unhealthy cheeks, as if they had been slapped. He was a tall man, slightly stooped, who might have profited enormously by an outdoor vacation, for he had spent most of his mature life within the confines of the Ministry. He had Corsican skin drawn tightly over the jutting bones of his face; and now, his eyes large with surprise and fright, he looked almost cadaverous.

"That is preposterous, monsieur !" He swallowed

loudly to steady himself. "I did nothing of the kind !"

From Monsieur Vaudebain came no answer. Instead, he was attentively watching Fragmont, who was again talking to the editor of *Le Nouveau Temps*. After a time that under-secretary covered the transmitter with his hand.

"Monsieur Chanlion says," he reported, "that the news was telephoned to his paper by Monsieur Lecour at six o'clock this morning. He says that since all official police items come through Lecour and since Lecour frequently sends in last-minute news, this was received without question. What shall I tell him, monsieur ?"

"Tell him *au revoir* and ring up !" ordered the Minister, actually jamming the pince-nez over the bridge of his nose. He swung around to stare squarely at Lecour. "Very well," he said crisply, "so that is that."

"But monsieur ——" Hands raised, extended, the second under-secretary looked unspeakably miserable. His forehead was creased by a dozen pleading lines. "I give you my word I did not do it ! I would not make a department secret public ! Why — why — I should as soon —— But, listen ! At six this morning I was still asleep. I can prove it. I spent the night at my brother's home. I ——"

Monsieur Vaudebain lifted his fingers to quiet the distressed assistant.

"I do not doubt your word, Monsieur Lecour," he said with cutting finality. "You assure me you did not telephone the paper — very well, that is that; you

did not. The point is *someone* did. We shall have to discover who — but at the moment there is a far more urgent matter to consider. What time is it ?"

After a glance at the watch on his wrist, Fragmont replied that it was twenty minutes of ten.

"Ah !" Monsieur Vaudebain rose. He was a short man, thickset, yet alive with that quality of confident vigor which had earned him his portfolio. "Fragmont, you have just time to reach the dock at Antwerp before the *Stateland* arrives !"

"The dock, monsieur —— ?" murmured Fragmont, startled.

"Exactly. We have bungled wretchedly and we must make the best of a bad mess. That article has stirred real danger for Mr. Ixell."

"You mean, monsieur, that the Circle — "

"I mean that *Le Nouveau Temps* specifically mentioned he was coming to study the atrocities of this — " the Minister stumbled over the phrase, uttering it distastefully " — this Circle of Terror." Parenthetically, to himself rather than to his aides, he injected, "Why *will* the people lend glamour to a band of rascals by giving them such names ?" Then he fastened his penetrating eyes on Fragmont. "I'll wager half a dozen revolvers are ready to greet Barron Ixell as he steps from the ship to the dock !"

Monsieur Lecour, who had succeeded in regaining a semblance of composure, uttered a little sound of consternation. It was he, after all, who had been responsible for the summoning of Mr. Ixell to Belgium.

Two years ago he had met the American criminolo-

gist at a conference in New York. And he had carried home an impression so profound that now, with the aptly named Circle of Terror operating in Brussels in spite of the best efforts of the police to suppress it, he had urged that the American be at least consulted. It was Mr. Ixell who had smashed the notorious Bradd Gang in New York; he had a way of his own in going about such things.

Fragmont, who was already at the door, said briskly:

"I shall have a strong guard at the dock, monsieur."

"Precisely. And you will apprehend any one who seems to have no explicable business there. Is it understood ?"

"Perfectly," Fragmont replied, nodding. "I shall telephone you, monsieur, as soon as Mr. Ixell has arrived."

One under-secretary departed for Antwerp, an hour's distance by automobile; the other, still bewildered, returned to his duties; and the Minister of Police remained alone.

Head lowered, hands clasped behind his back, he began a slow walk about the heavy, yielding carpet of his office. A remarkable chamber it was, spacious, solid. There were two immense windows draped in crimson, yet they could not entirely dispel the sombre atmosphere of the room. Nor were they charitable in the light they threw upon the several large paintings on the walls, so that most visitors carried away but vague ideas of those pictures. It was all very ponderous — the office, the furniture, the few bookcases.

It had been decorated during the early reign of Leopold II, and no change had since been made.

And Monsieur Vaudebain, pacing the carpet, often felt that the accumulated responsibilities of all those years had descended upon him. He had inherited the room, the pomp, the glory — and the troubles.

But this new concern — that of the Circle of Terror — could be accredited only to his own régime. It had caused him enough worry, enough suffering, in the past few months ! Doubtless it had etched a few lines in the skin under his Egyptian beard. Today's danger was merely another phase of a constant peril. Would that accursed Circle actually have the temerity to await Barron Ixell at the dock — to dispatch him at the outset, as it had dispatched others ? He believed that this would be tried, was thoroughly convinced that it would.

The *Stateland* was to arrive at eleven — in an hour. Well, Fragmont's telephone call would settle apprehensions. The under-secretary was well on his way now.

Monsieur Vaudebain suddenly halted and looked over his shoulder. There had been a knock at the door; and now, in response to his call, a clerk entered, bearing a card. Somewhat impatiently the Minister snapped:

"Who is it ?"

"Mr. Barron Ixell, monsieur."

CHAPTER II

MR. IXELL

FOR an instant that was like a vacuum in his day, Monsieur Vaudebain stared across that massive chamber. He eyed the stolid clerk as if the fellow had uttered some insane impossibility.

But there the man stood, expressionless and serious, tendering the card. The Minister drew back his shoulders, raised his head. The wonder on his countenance increased as, pressing the pince-nez more securely on its rather inadequate perch, he moved over the thick carpet to peer at the little card himself.

No, there was no mistake — Barron Ixell was the name.

"Well, now!" softly exclaimed Monsieur Vaudebain. "What is this?" He looked up at the clerk. "Ask him to come in, of course!"

Yet it was not Mr. Ixell who entered first. Instead came Lecour, agitated, queerly joyous, with a glow again visible under his olive skin. Palpably there were many things he wished to say, but because of the man who appeared immediately behind him, he could simply wave his hand toward the visitor and attempt a formal introduction:

"Mr. Ixell — monsieur ! I have the pleasure to present ——"

Amazed as he was by the American's appearance in Bruxelles fully an hour before his scheduled arrival at Antwerp, the Minister of Police had the tact to force his tense curiosity behind a few social niceties. He welcomed Barron Ixell most cordially, with a warmth and sincerity that emanated from deep within him. It was his way with men he intended to like. And not, indeed, until they were comfortably settled beside the black desk, did Monsieur Vaudebain utter the query that tingled on his tongue:

"How did you come to Bruxelles, monsieur — and when ?"

Ixell smiled as he removed his gloves.

"I came by train from Antwerp, just two weeks ago, Monsieur Vaudebain."

The Minister of Police leaned back in his chair, in the manner of one limply relaxing after a strain. His round gaze darted interrogatively across the desk to Lecour, who had remained there, standing, smiling excitedly, his hands clasped before him. What the Minister's eyes mutely demanded was whether this American ought to be taken in earnest. Apparently Lecour believed so, for he seemed to beam, his teeth forming a pearly gash in that gaunt, dark face of his.

"Two weeks ago !" repeated Monsieur Vaudebain, quite stunned. "But —— Why, I have a police guard at the *Stateland* dock waiting to meet you *today !*"

"Thank you," said Ixell, visibly pleased. "I had

hoped you would do that. If you hadn't, I should have suggested your doing so. In fact, it was with that idea that I 'phoned the news of my supposed arrival to *Le Nouveau Temps*."

Possibly the Minister would have exclaimed something in his renewed astonishment, but Barron Ixell continued:

"I owe Monsieur Lecour my apologies for using his name. In my eagerness to have the article inserted in the paper, I thought it best to give it an official source. I called Monsieur Lecour's home at half-past five this morning, but he was not there. Nor was the Ministry's office open. So, you see, I had to assume the responsibility and telephone to *Le Nouveau Temps* myself."

A sound of relief, of self-vindication, issued from the under-secretary. Monsieur Vaudebain, however, ignored it, addressing himself to the American.

"I do not fully understand. Why was it necessary to insert the article ? You yourself asked us to keep your coming secret."

Even while he awaited an answer, the Minister of Police was marvelling at Barron Ixell's apparent youth. He had expected, for no tangible reason, to encounter an elderly gentleman, perhaps academic and grave in demeanor, perhaps scholarly in his attitude toward a case, perhaps grey and taut. He had expected someone who would sit with him stiffly, formally, silently absorbing the details of a mystery in whose solution his experienced skill had been sought.

And here, to the Minister's mild confusion, was a

man in the early thirties, taller than himself, yet of no unusual height; a man with a vital, active countenance and lively eyes — a man with a long face, in truth, but not a solemn face. It was surmounted by smoothly combed brown hair which showed no trace of the anticipated grey. He was impeccably groomed, Monsieur Vaudebain was compelled to admit; about his grey suit there hovered no hint of that academic carelessness the Minister had visioned.

This, then, was Barron Ixell, specialist in criminal research ? This then, was the man who had sent the Bradd Gang to prison in New York ? How ridiculous preconceptions of people can be !

"You will pardon me, I trust, if I found it wise to change my mind," Ixell explained. "For two weeks I have been in Bruxelles studying your so-called Circle of Terror. It is a very formidable organization, I have discovered, including the best talent in this country, and also much of that of the underworld of Paris. But the members of this organization simply refuse to come out in the open. So I ventured to offer them a bit of bait . . ."

Monsieur Vaudebain's eyes brightened.

"Ah ! You *wanted* them to come to the *Stateland* dock ?"

"Yes — in the hope of killing another ambitious investigator." The American smiled wryly. "The idea occurred to me only during the night. Of course, your agent at the dock will arrest all who cannot supply clear cause for being there ?"

"Those are my orders," said the Minister, looking

toward Lecour with greater ease than he had evinced all morning. "In the first place, the steamship lines no longer allow any one on the piers without a pass. Visitors must show legitimate reason for desiring to go there. And you can trust our men to be present when passes are requested; and also to watch closely every person who obtains one — after he is *on* the dock !"

Monsieur Vaudebain paused, of a sudden, and wrinkled his brow. His hand rose to the square beard and, after a moment's thought, he went on:

"You say, Mr. Ixell, you have been in Bruxelles two weeks ? May I ask just what you have been doing in that time ?"

"Certainly," Ixell replied with amiable readiness. "I have been the most successful pickpocket in Belgium."

"Eh —— ?" Again the Minister mutely demanded of Lecour whether this American were jesting.

"Oh, I'm serious," Ixell asserted. "Two weeks ago a rogue named André Fridou sold a watch and wallet he had stolen to another rogue who buys such things. Fridou has spent two weeks in making the acquaintance of the fences in Bruxelles. He has sold them things daily, little knick-knacks he filched here and there. And I, of course, am Fridou."

"You are Fridou . . ." echoed Monsieur Vaudebain, rather blankly.

"None other. André Fridou is known to a dozen fences as the most skillful little pickpocket to visit Bruxelles in years. He never appears empty-handed.

Indeed, he is establishing such an enviable reputation that I hope his remarkable services will some day be sought by that crowd of remarkable villains you call the Circle of Terror."

And now that he was beginning to comprehend the methods of Barron Ixell, the Minister of Police pushed forward in his chair. He adjusted the pince-nez in order to observe this American more carefully. H'm, there were a few lines in that long face which were not really signs of youth — stern little lines.

"I see," slowly said Monsieur Vaudebain. "And I suppose that all these trinkets Fridou brings the fences have been purchased by Mr. Barron Ixell ?"

At that the American laughed quite gaily. He had produced a silver cigarette case and after tendering it to both the Minister and Lecour — neither of whom accepted one of its contents — he took out a cigarette himself and lit it.

"Quite right, Monsieur Vaudebain," he confessed. "I spend almost a thousand francs a day in buying the things Fridou sells for almost nothing. He *is* a rogue, upon my word. But then," Ixell became grave, "a thousand francs a day is not much to pay for admission to the Circle of Terror."

Leaning toward the American, peering through his glasses, the Minister of Police was trying to pry the man's very thoughts.

"You really believe," he asked quietly, "that you — that it is possible ——"

"To become a member of that crowd ? Yes, I do. Monsieur Vaudebain, for two weeks I have been a

rascal slinking about the vilest cafés; I have been an Apache of Bruxelles; I have gossiped with the worst men and women I could find. I have made friends that nauseated me. Sometimes I have drooled all night over a glass of beer with a loose-tongued drunkard who hugged me because I was a generous companion. And those people, monsieur, know things which never come to the ears of the police. From a word here, a word there, I have learned this about the Circle of Terror. It is an organization of highly skilled criminals, men who are experts in their various specialties, whether it be blowing safes or throwing knives."

"Have you," quickly queried the Minister, "learned the names of any of them ?"

Ixell shook his head. The cigarette he had lighted lay forgotten in a tray on the desk, its smoke rising in a straight, unruffled column.

"No, I have not progressed that far. In truth, I am afraid those friends I have made did not know themselves. That was why I thought of the newspaper trick. I hoped and I still hope that we may be able to snare at least one member of that gang whose tongue can be made to wag."

He noticed the cigarette, picked it up and puffed at it once, then returned it to the tray.

"But," he added, "if the police cannot work *down* into the Circle of Terror, then perhaps André Fridou can work *up* into it — by virtue of his amazing dexterity as a pickpocket. I don't think Bruxelles has a crook with more clever fingers than our Fridou — ask

any fence. He never comes empty-handed and supports himself from day to day with as little difficulty as a millionaire — but on a small scale, naturally."

To Monsieur Vaudebain one thing had become indisputably evident: Barron Ixell did have a way of his own in going about these things, and a very energetic way at that. Himself a man of infinite energy, the Minister was thoroughly delighted. He had not expected such active co-operation from the expert to whom Lecour had written merely as some might write to a consulting engineer. That Ixell's studies in crime had been of an international character rather than wholly American had become manifest to the undersecretary at his first encounter with the man.

At that time he had brought home the news that in Ixell's study there stood filing cabinets in which the careers of the most notorious criminals of Europe were faithfully catalogued. Under "Belgium" Lecour had found more than two hundred cards!

The depths to which the American descended in his scientific researches in crime impressed themselves mightily on Monsieur Vaudebain. He regarded Barron Ixell with a new appreciation.

"You came," he inquired, "two weeks before the appointed time in order to make a private study?"

"I did," Ixell admitted. "I usually like to start at the bottom, and by myself. If you will forgive my saying so, the aid of the police can sometimes be an impediment. I mean you can drive a single nail deep into a board, easily; but you would have an awkward time handling a barrelful at once."

"Exactly," murmured the Minister of Police. Another thing which surprised him was Ixell's facile familiarity with French. He mentioned it, and the American explained simply that he had lived four years in Paris, amassing records and notes for his files.

"They must be voluminous, those files," suggested Monsieur Vaudebain.

"Quite," agreed Ixell. "But I am making a life study of crime and the ways of — shall we say curbing it ?"

"Fighting it."

"No, Monsieur, that is a wrong conception. A doctor does not *fight* a diseased patient. He diagnoses, tries to stem the disease, tries to help the patient back to his feet. I choose to regard myself as a sort of doctor, if you understand. To send a man to prison is no great accomplishment. Any man on your force is capable of doing that. But to send a man *away* from prison — ah, there lies the goal of criminal research !"

"But you *have* caused men to go to prison, and even to the electric chair, Mr. Ixell — in several rather famous cases, I recall."

Thoughtfully Barron Ixell gazed at the tip of his cigarette.

"Yes," he said slowly, quietly, "I have. They were the incurables. The lepers." A peculiar light burned in his narrowed eyes. "I don't like to end men's lives, Monsieur Vaudebain. Nobody likes to work with lepers. But it is necessary to eradicate them from society for the sake of society. They are a menace, these incurables; not only in themselves but in the

influence they exert on others. Consider your Circle of Terror, for example. In its ranks there are many who can eventually be cured. And yet I'll venture to say there is one — the leader, organizer, brains, and manipulator of it all — who is probably quite beyond recovery. It is he that must be destroyed !"

There was a moment of stillness. Then Barron Ixell drew a hasty breath.

"To return to the point of my visit," he said. "I take it, monsieur, that you have certain data concerning the Circle of Terror you would wish me to see ?"

Monsieur Vaudebain nodded. From a drawer of his desk he extracted a large, fat envelope which he placed before the American.

"I have had copies of our records made," he said. "There is not much — simply notations of crimes which we have laid to this Circle. Many robberies and — tragedies, too ——"

The sudden ring of the telephone interrupted the Minister.

It startled him, somehow. He mumbled something and lifted the instrument himself, though Lecour had moved to serve him. He said loudly, "Hello !" and listened.

And then he fell back, as though he had been stricken, his skin as grey as his beard. For an instant he remained that way, gripping the telephone with a white-knuckled hand, before he turned to fasten wide, terrified eyes on Barron Ixell.

"Bon Dieu !" he gasped. "Fragmont — my undersecretary — Fragmont has been shot !"

CHAPTER III

Nº 13 RUE CHINOIS

ANDRÉ FRIDOU, that cleverest of pickpockets, had a great deal on his mind as he started along the Rue Haute at eight o'clock that evening.

He slouched along the gutter, for the sidewalk was too narrow for comfort, and his appearance was such that even the astute Minister of Police might not have recognized Mr. Barron Ixell in this sneering ragamuffin.

Low over his forehead a ragged cap was drawn, tilted so that its peak concealed his right eye. But worn and shapeless as it looked, it did not lack its touch of swagger — for a sprig of green from which a flower had been torn protruded from it on one side.

The man's long face was in sad want of both a wash and a shave, yet in this vicinity of Bruxelles it could not be called actually dirty; there were other faces which left his clean by contrast.

Around his neck and knotted at the front he wore a strip of silk whose colors could have been conceived

only by an artist in the bizarre: vermilion, green, yellow, white — all blended in a brilliant design. And this scarf he sported proudly.

His dark clothes were shapeless and soiled. But as he moved along, hands in pockets and shoulders bent, he had that in his bearing which challenged any one to criticize his appearance.

The Rue Haute — Bowery of Bruxelles — was alive and uproarous with its nightly excitement. The narrow sidewalks were thronged with shuffling men, most of them resembling Fridou in type, and with agitated women.

These latter, the ladies of the lesser world, wore black shawls over their shoulders; they had on ugly aprons and, here and there, wooden shoes. Yet they knew how to be coquettes. Winking eyes, laughing, daring voices, occasional shouts of defiance to men who taunted them, testified to their art. Some gloried in immense combs, iridescent with imitation jewels, that rose out of their gleaming black hair.

Crowds — malodorous crowds — jamming the gutter. The curses of enraged men who tried to drive pushcarts through the throng. The music of a hurdy-gurdy, the jingle of a tambourine, the yells of children dancing around it and tormenting the player. Yellow lights splashing out of endless store windows and cafés. Noise, commotion, dirt. Excitement, hilarity, wretchedness, romance — the Rue Haute!

And through it all André Fridou, pickpocket, pushed his way, talking to no one save perhaps now and then some girl who plucked his sleeve, on which

occasions he would snarl an oath at the offender and continue his way.

He was thinking about the Circle of Terror.

Its latest victim, Fragmont, lay in a hospital with a bullet furrow across his chest.

It had all happened within a few yards of the dock at which the *Stateland* was anchored. Fragmont, accompanied by three policemen, had accosted an unknown and unsavory fellow lounging in the vicinity for a reason he could not satisfactorily explain. In his pocket a fully loaded revolver had been found.

The under-secretary had ordered the man led to a Department of Police automobile when, from behind the shelter of a warehouse wall, veritable thunder had burst upon the police — a roaring shower of bullets.

Fragmont dropped at once, shot diagonally across the chest — the wound running from a spot just above his heart almost to the right shoulder, as if the bullet had risen from the ground.

And in the confusion the arrested man had managed to run off, to vanish, while his hidden companions waged the momentary battle. By the time sufficient police strength had been gathered to charge around the warehouse, not one of the attackers was in sight. No doubt automobiles had rushed them away.

On all this André Fridou pondered as he shouldered his way along the Rue Haute. And also he pondered on the Circle of Terror, which had perpetrated this latest atrocity.

He had, that afternoon, carefully read all the notes

on that organization's frightful activities. These included robberies, shootings — the deaths of two detectives — and spectacular assaults.

Could all these crimes be inscribed against the Circle of Terror ? Perhaps not. Yet they had all occurred within so short a time, overwhelming Bruxelles as once a great war had done, sweeping over the city like a devastating tidal wave that it did seem as if some single power, terrible and mad and violent, had been unleashed upon the city. What was it ? *Who* was it ? Organizations, whether for evil or good, always had leaders — or a leader. Who, then, was at the head of the Circle of Terror ? Who drove it, commanded it, supplied the brains ? Who was its core ?

These musings marched through the brain of André Fridou until — after selling two watches and a cheap brooch for a total of four francs at various shops — he finally entered the establishment of Jules Camillaud.

A small jewelry store, ostensibly, it was illuminated by sickly gas light that seemed to hang in it like a haze. In the very heart of the Rue Haute, it occupied a niche between a noisy, reeking café and a filthy butcher shop.

Its proprietor stood hunched behind the counter when Fridou appeared. He was a small bald man, grinning like a gargoyle and nodding a head that seemed almost fleshless, reminding one of a skull. As he listened to the din in the Rue Haute, Monsieur Camillaud smoked a long-stemmed pipe whose stench

filled the place. Familiarly he received André Fridou, meanwhile kicking a cat through a curtained door behind him.

Camillaud put aside his pipe and critically picked up the watch and chain which the pickpocket tossed to the counter. He frowned at the article, turned it over and over, and finally shook that emaciated head.

"Cheap stuff," he commented. "Very cheap."

"How much'll you give ?" demanded Fridou, suspiciously.

Monsieur Camillaud shrugged. "Oh — one franc."

"One franc !" In stupefaction the pickpocket leaped back from the counter. "One franc ! Are you trying to tell me that is worth no more than one franc ? Why, you crawling tail of an eel, that watch can't be bought for a hundred francs !"

Not at all offended, Monsieur Camillaud tendered the watch back to its owner.

"One franc, that is all," he said staunchly. "To me it is worth no more."

From André Fridou issued a stream of sizzling oaths that might have amazed even the Rue Haute. The face above the kaleidoscopic scarf assumed a red hue of rage. One franc ! He called the little fence every form of despicable reptile he could imagine, yet Jules Camillaud did not yield, nor did he become angered. He was quite accustomed to being likened to the lower animals — and worse.

In the end it was Fridou who grudgingly surrendered. But his transactions were not completed.

From his inner pocket he unexpectedly drew a

beaded handbag whose brilliance brought a sudden glow into the fence's deep-set eyes. Camillaud caught his breath, despite himself. His hands darted eagerly across the counter.

Yet Fridou, shrewd as he was clever with his fingers, snatched the bag out of the small man's reach. He held it up, dangling it alluringly. Without doubt it was pretty and worth much; in truth, Barron Ixell had paid six hundred francs for it.

"Listen, lizard," whispered Fridou, his head thrust forward, his eyes peering. "I wasn't going to sell this, see? I was saving it as a present for — for a certain lady friend, see? But I need a hundred francs. You can get several hundred for this easy. What do you say? Do I get the hundred?"

Camillaud appeared shocked by the demand. He protested, argued, bargained, but Fridou knew, by the light in the fence's countenance, that he had won. And finally the hundred francs were grudgingly conceded.

Fridou grinned as he emptied the bag before giving it to its purchaser. He threw upon the counter a handkerchief, a change purse, a lipstick, a powder compact, several keys, and a comb. Barron Ixell knew his business.

And it was while pocketing the hundred francs that he suddenly felt Camillaud's slimy hand crawl about his wrist.

Scowling, Fridou glanced up to encounter a most insinuating, evil little smile.

"What's the matter?" he demanded.

Camillaud seemed to draw his bony head down between his shoulders, like a turtle.

"Listen, my friend," he whispered, "I want to talk to you. I want to compliment you. You are the most successful little pickpocket I have known in many years ——"

"Who said I'm a pickpocket ?" snapped Fridou.

"Pah, this is no time for masks ! I am serious. For two weeks I have been watching you, my friend. And I have decided that you are wasting your time."

"Wasting my time ! You squirming leg of a shrimp, is it any of your affair what I do with my time ?"

Under his tongue Jules Camillaud clucked placatingly, swayed his head from side to side.

"Tuh, tuh ! You become excited too quick. I am in earnest with you, Fridou. I say you are wasting your time. What do you ever get, with all your cleverness ? Hey ? Cheap watches, cheap this and cheap that. Even this bag, pretty as it is, got you only a hundred francs ! Pah ! Is that money for a man of your ability ?

Slowly Fridou's rage was subsiding, and he came closer to the counter, eyeing Camillaud narrowly. After a moment of stillness, he quietly asked:

"What are you driving at ?"

The fence glanced over his shoulder, surreptitiously, and toward the door, as though assuring himself of privacy. Then he let his voice sink still lower.

"Fridou, my friend, with your skill you could make thousands ! Understand ? Thousands !"

"Come on," muttered the pickpocket, impatiently, "what's the proposition you've got in your head ?"

But Jules Camillaud was not yet prepared to reveal the point of his idea. His grip on Fridou's wrist tightened.

"Wouldn't you like to receive a few thousand francs every now and then ? Wouldn't you like to get — say — *diamonds* instead of cheap watches ?"

"Hey ?" exclaimed Fridou. "Diamonds ? Where ?"

Camillaud chuckled.

"I knew that would interest you. Well, listen, my friend. For two weeks I have watched you and your work. I have talked about you to — a friend of mine, understand ? And he would like to see you — to make you an offer."

At that André Fridou abruptly straightened and waved a hand in refusal.

"Nothing doing. Not for me. If you're trying to tie me up with some cheap gang, you've got the wrong man." The pickpocket buttoned his jacket and turned toward the door. "I work better alone than with a crowd of clumsy crooks who want to share what I get."

"A moment !" whispered Camillaud, eagerly, leaning far across the counter. His arm was outstretched as if to draw Fridou back. "A moment, fool ! This is not a cheap gang !"

With a mocking sneer the pickpocket looked back from the door.

"Well, what would a lizard like you be connected with," he jeered, "if not with a cheap crowd ?" His

gaze wandered about the dingy store, and he laughed contemptuously. To hear the owner of such an establishment speak of diamonds and thousands of francs struck him, apparently, as ridiculous. He looked back at the man.

"Camillaud," he said, "there's only one crowd in Bruxelles with any brains and ability. There's only one crowd that does big things in this town. Only one crowd worth hanging with — for real money. Read the papers any day and you'll see I'm right. And that, Camillaud, isn't the sort of gang a lizard like you would be tied to. You aren't big enough. The Circle of Terror doesn't need your kind."

Jules Camillaud suddenly paled, both his hands lifted.

"Shut the door, fool !" he whispered fiercely. And then he came scurrying around the counter to grasp Fridou's arm. "Listen, I told you this is not a cheap crowd ! More I can't say. But there's a man who wants to see you — a friend of mine, understand ? I told him I'd send you, and if you go, I promise you will lose nothing. What do you say ?"

For a while André Fridou considered, thoughtfully eyeing the little fence. He began to scratch his cheek. And at last he carelessly shrugged his hunched shoulders.

"Well," he said lightly, "I'll go listen to your friend's proposition, but I won't tie up with any gang of clumsy crooks whose shirts I could take without their knowing it."

"You'll go ?" hastily repeated Camillaud, his hands tingling.

"Just to hear what he's got to say — won't promise anything else. Where is he ?"

The fence's cavernous eyes were sparkling. He squeezed Fridou's wrist tightly.

"Go to Number 13 Rue Chinois," he directed in a whisper, "and ask for Monsieur Seizic !"

CHAPTER IV

A PROPOSITION

THE RUE CHINOIS was a black cleavage off the gloomier end of the Rue Haute. Little more than an alley some four yards wide, it rushed up a steep hill for perhaps two hundred feet and then ended its precipitate course abruptly, in a blind alley, against the cracked wall of an ancient and abandoned factory.

From the foot of the street André Fridou scowled up its length, as if wondering whether he ought to penetrate so ugly a hole. He stood with his hands jammed deep in his pockets, his cap dragged down to its jauntiest angle.

In the nearest doorway a girl, with a shawl clutched about her shoulders, fixed saucy eyes upon him. She leaned there languidly, her head tilted, her pursed lips murmuring a taunting song.

But Fridou — fiery Fridou who had the blood of an Apache in his veins — glared at her and spat at her feet. Then, slouching, he advanced up the Rue Chinois.

And though he appeared surly and unwilling to continue, he was, in truth, experiencing the wildest excite-

ment inwardly. For he had not forgotten the agitation of Jules Camillaud when the Circle of Terror had been mentioned. Some instinct told him that at last the two weeks of endeavor were bearing their first fruit. What the police had been unable to do, what the ruse at the dock had failed to accomplish — this André Fridou, pickpocket, was beginning to manage. He was on the point of gaining a foothold within the Circle, a wedge into its secret depths.

The old church at the end of the Rue Haute solemnly chimed nine o'clock as André Fridou reached Number 13.

It was the last house in the street, a low, antiquated hovel crushed against the side of the ancient factory. Its windows were shuttered, its door inhospitably closed, so that it presented a dark, surly front to his cryptic gaze.

Fridou inspected it carefully, sneeringly. Then, without removing his hands from his pockets, he kicked loudly, and with contempt, at the door.

He had to wait a long time, and to kick again, before it was finally opened. But in that interval of waiting he had heard a movement at one of the upper shutters; someone, he knew, had peered out at him.

The inquisitive head of an almost hairless hag was thrust at him, and with it, from inside the house, flowed the sickening smell of decayed cheese. Fridou frowned at the old woman.

"Where's this Monsieur Seizic?" he demanded. "I've been standing here half an hour!"

The woman squinted from his head to his toes.

"And who are you, my sweet-tempered devil ?" she shot back.

"Me ? Me, I'm André Fridou — that's who ! And I was sent here by Jules Camillaud to ask for Monsieur Seizic. But I swear I'll send Camillaud *and* Seizic to the pigs before I waste another minute in waiting ! Do they think I have nothing better to do with my time than hang around smelly black alleys ?"

"Ah !" The woman's eyes widened and something like a grin spread over her face, revealing a line of jagged, formless teeth. She opened the door farther and motioned to him to come in, jerking a thumb toward the source of the cheese odor. "So you are the young rabbit Camillaud promised to send, hey ? Well, you'd be decent if you didn't have such a loose tongue ! Get in !"

Fridou slouched into the place, and when the door was shut behind him, he stood in utter darkness. A hand grasped his elbow — the hag's bony fingers, clutching him like talons — and she guided him forward and turned him into what was presumably a chamber off the hall.

It was black. Her hand released him, and her cracked voice said, "Wait !" He heard a door softly closed. And Fridou remained alone.

How long he stood in that Stygian room, he did not precisely know. Long minutes dragged by, during which he tried to move about, only to strike chairs with his knees. Twice he lit matches, but their pale glow disclosed only a rickety wooden table on a car-

petless floor, a few broken chairs, and an old circular washtub.

Presently Fridou resigned himself to the blackness. After all, what was the sense of hurrying fate ? He had plenty of time. With easy carelessness he sat on the shaky table, crossed his legs, and softly began to whistle the piquant melody the girl with the shawl had sung to him. He looked upwards, seeing nothing, and swung his feet in rhythm with the song.

And then, almost at his ear, a man's voice said:

"I regret you had to wait, Monsieur Fridou."

He did not jump. He merely ceased whistling and turned his head.

"A thousand devils !" he snapped. "That is a rotten way to sneak up on a man !"

He saw no one in that blackness, but the sound of a chuckle rippled to him across the room. Fridou sat still. His legs were crossed as before; his hands were plunged in his pockets. What sort of game was this ?

There came the scrape of a match; he saw a flare — and a gas jet glowed a dazzling, brilliant gold at the opposite end of the chamber.

Under the light stood a man, a small, stout man who turned to smile most amiably upon André Fridou. He possessed a round countenance whose complexion, in that luminosity, had the appearance of fresh butter. His hair was grey and wiry, combed back in pompadour fashion, and he ran his fingers through it as he eyed his visitor.

"I am Seizic," he announced abruptly.

Without budging from the table, Fridou nodded. It occurred to him that Monsieur Seizic was astonishingly well dressed for the inhabitant of such a wretched hovel. He wore a well-tailored dark suit, and his shoes were covered by creamy spats.

"I am glad to see you came," went on Monsieur Seizic, clasping his hands behind his back. He was smiling ingratiatingly as he inspected André Fridou. "Camillaud was not certain —— "

"Damn !" suddenly ejaculated the pickpocket, sliding from the table. "I'm tired of this play ! Camillaud said you had a proposition to make me. What is it ? Let's get to the point !"

Not the slightest change was perceptible in Monsieur Seizic's smile. Palpably he was not to be hurried or frightened. He lifted his shoulders and let them sink again.

"How hasty — how hasty !" he murmured. "You have the temperament of Montmartre — "

"Where I come from, if it's any of your business !"

"But indeed it is my business. Everything is my business — about my associates."

"Hey ? Who's your —— "

"Now, just be calm, my dear Fridou, and let us discuss things quietly. First of all, it may interest you to know that you are, so to speak, under arrest."

At that phrase, the pickpocket gasped and leaped backward, his hands finally jerked out of his trousers. He stood staring, menacing — but deep within him Barron Ixell was slyly smiling.

"Under arrest?" he cried. "What d'you mean? By the leg of ——"

"I mean," said Monsieur Seizic, "that you are potentially, not actually, under arrest. We have here all the articles you sold to Camillaud during the past two weeks. The loss of most of them has been reported to the police. So you see, my dear Fridou, I — having some excellent friends among the members of the force — could very easily have you arrested as the chief of those — ah — trophies."

That the man was lying in an effort to establish his own power, Barron Ixell knew very well; the loss of those articles had never been reported. But Fridou the pickpocket played his rôle well. He blinked, astounded, pale. He clenched his fists and shot through his teeth:

"This is a dirty double-crossing trick! I'll break that snake Camillaud over my knee! I'll slit his ——"

"Now, now, dear Fridou, be calm, if you please. You are not yet under arrest. You are quite as free and safe as ever. I merely wish you to know that we — ah — hold a certain influence over you. Do you understand?"

"Oh, I understand, all right! You want to club me into doing some work for you that you can't do yourself, hey?"

Monsieur Seizic inclined his round head in a pleasant bow.

"I'll pay you the compliment," he replied, "of admitting that. I'll even go further and confess that I

believe you to be the cleverest pickpocket in Bruxelles. You have probably the most agile fingers Camillaud has ever known, and he has known many."

Obviously the flattery pleased Fridou, for he slowly dropped some of his hostility and returned his hands to his pockets. Once more he leaned against the table.

"Go on," he said.

"Ah, but certainly. What I should like to ask is — how would you feel about earning a thousand francs every now and then ? Let us make it more definite: how would you like to earn your first thousand francs tomorrow evening ?"

"Are you joking ?"

"But no ! I am very, very serious. I have a most engaging offer for your talented fingers."

Fridou grunted something and frowned.

"Go ahead," he said, rather sullenly.

Now, however, Monsieur Seizic approached him and sat upon one of the broken chairs. He clasped his hands around one knee and continued to smile up at his visitor. And after a while he said:

"Before I do go ahead, my friend, you must understand certain things. I represent an — well, call it an organization. It is a very strong organization, you must know. It exerts influence in many quarters and has made many men rich — men who started as poor as you. Really rich, my dear Fridou. And how ? By giving them greater opportunities than they themselves could ever have found. You understand ?"

"I'm not deaf. Go on."

"In our organization we employ only experts. Ex-

perts in many fields. And you, Fridou, are an expert, I believe. At any rate, I am willing to let you prove your skill — for a thousand francs."

The pickpocket was frowning curiously but not at all in an unfriendly manner. Evidently, the talk of thousands of francs had stirred him profoundly. He murmured something, and Monsieur Seizic resumed:

"We work this way: I will tell you exactly where you can place your fingers on — say, a gem. The rest is up to you. When you procure that gem, you bring it to me. You receive a thousand francs for your trouble — and that is all. How does that please you ?"

André Fridou drew a deep breath, shuffled his feet, shifted his position.

"It sounds too good," he decided.

"All real opportunities do. I am frank in saying that our organization secures the services of experts whenever it can. It pays. The best hands are always the safest."

"But," objected the pickpocket, "suppose I were to get one of these gems. They must be worth a great deal more than a thousand francs, if you're willing to pay me that. What would stop me from selling it to somebody else for more ?"

Again Monsieur Seizic smiled, but now abetted the smile by a facile gesture of his fat hands.

"Two things would stop you, Fridou. First, the bullets of some other — ah — expert, perhaps. For we permit no treason, you understand. And secondly, if not that, then arrest."

"Arrest —— ?"

"Yes, indeed. We exert influence, as I told you, in many circles. The police are one of those circles, fortunately. You would be arrested for the things you sold to any one else."

"So !" cried Fridou. "Then you would be arrested, too, my fine friend, for I should most positively babble !"

"Ah, yes, yes — if I could be found. But I never would be found, you see. Monsieur Seizic — poof ! I may as well tell you that he exists only here. Outside of this house, there is no such man. He disappears at the threshold." The plump man dismissed the notion with a sweep of his hand. "Let us return to the important question: Would you consider earning a thousand francs tomorrow night ?"

For a long time André Fridou regarded Monsieur Seizic hesitantly, suspiciously. He appeared to be considering the matter with shrewd coolness.

But at last he sprang away from the table, snapped a finger over his head, and ejaculated:

"For a thousand francs — anything, Monsieur Seizic ! Give me my directions !"

CHAPTER V

THE PALLID LADY

A STEADY, chilling rain rattled monotonously upon Bruxelles the following night as André Fridou reeled drunkenly along the Avenue du Toison d'Or.

This broad boulevard was diametrically opposite the Rue Haute. With trees aligned along its centre in military precision, it seemed removed from the slums by half the world instead of half the city. The residences which walled it were austere in their dignity; the whole avenue, in truth, held an atmosphere of stateliness — to which, no doubt, it was entitled, since it passed within a few yards of the King's magnificent palace.

Here André Fridou was as out of place as a man with a monocle on the Rue Haute. But he was drunk — though Barron Ixell was quite sober and alert. He staggered along, singing to himself softly and occasionally pausing to lean against a house for rest.

Drenched by the rain, he looked more battered than ever. And yet the vari-colored scarf was knotted about his neck as jauntily as always, and a sprig of green still hung from his cap.

From time to time people carrying umbrellas passed. But they shied away from the drunkard — though they later looked back in either amusement or disgust. They were not frequent, however, these passersby, for it was almost ten o'clock, and the cold rain discouraged walking.

At last Fridou arrived in front of a house drawn back from the sidewalk — a big house, white and imposing. Before it lay a small garden, and around the garden stood a forbidding iron fence.

And here the intoxicated Fridou stopped, reclining against the iron bars as though he were enjoying a brilliant Sunday afternoon instead of this miserable night. He started to sing — quietly. He looked up into the black skies, while rain dripped from the peak of his cap, and serenaded the unseen moon.

And yet he was not interested in the sky. Rather, his glance continuously darted to a glistening black limousine drawn up to the curb, its chauffeur huddling in his seat.

It was here that Fridou had been directed to come by Monsieur Seizic.

At a few minutes after ten, he had been informed, a lady and gentleman would depart from this house in order to attend the ball given by the Minister of Education in honor of his daughter's betrothal. The lady, Monsieur Seizic had said, was extremely handsome — remarkably handsome — and invariably set off her beauty by wearing splendid jewels. Notably, she displayed, at important functions, a brooch of ex-

quisitely matched diamonds — and it could scarcely be doubted that she would wear it tonight.

Was Fridou really clever ? Then let him show his skill now !

And as Fridou leaned against the fence, awaiting the handsome lady, Barron Ixell laughed within the drunkard.

For Barron Ixell knew, divined, felt, that this was all simply a test for the shrewd Fridou. They were trying to see, that "organization," whether the pickpocket was dependable. Quite certainly Fridou was being watched from behind some of those trees. He would be watched until he delivered the brooch to Number 13 Rue Chinois. And if he tried to run away with it — ah, but he wouldn't !

Was the "organization" the notorious Circle of Terror ? Of that he could not be sure. Yet he recalled the actions of Jules Camillaud on hearing the name, and a surge of instinctive assurance rose within him.

Well, Fridou would steal the brooch ! What if he were clumsy about doing it ? In all probability the "handsome" lady and her escort were members of the organization. They were expecting him. She would let the brooch be taken — to try the reliability of this new recruit. He would take the chance.

Suddenly a golden lane of light splashed across the wet garden.

Looking over his shoulder, the drenched Fridou saw two people emerge from the opened door.

There she was, the handsome lady, in dazzling ap-

parel. Over a white gown she had gathered a white cape; yet her bosom was exposed sufficiently for Fridou to catch the sparkle of something . . .

As she came down the steps on delicately slippered feet, he noticed, too, the diadem in her hair — black hair, as alive as the plumes of a raven. She hung to her escort's arm, quite snugly; an elderly man, he appeared, with tufts of grey visible under the brim of his silk hat.

Immediately the chauffeur opened the door of the limousine and waited attentively. At the same moment a servant bearing an umbrella hurried out of the house and followed the lady, protecting her as a slave might shade an Indian rajah.

Fridou steadied himself. Somehow he would have to acquire that brooch !

And then — his song rose to ribald heights, loud and hoarse and bawdy. Swinging his arms, he lurched away from the iron fence and went reeling drunkenly toward the limousine. And though the lady and her escort both stopped, eyeing him in cold disgust and waiting for him to stagger past, André Fridou suddenly developed a most friendly mood.

With all the gay camaraderie of a pleasant drunkard, he turned and actually embraced, with his right arm, the horrified gentleman in evening clothes. And his left arm rose toward the woman's shoulder, with an offensive intimacy that made her recoil. Yet he managed to catch hold of her.

"Sing with me a song of Burgundy !" bawled the

drunkard, in bubbling good humor. "Sing with me a good old merry air——"

His fingers slipped over the brooch, caressing it.

That she had felt his awkward touch, he was certain; yet she said nothing, but stared into his unkempt, unshaven countenance as though it were something unutterably vile. And Fridou returned the look with bleary eyes. He saw a pallid, oval countenance framed by tightly coiffed black hair. He had just an instant to peer at it.

Then the chauffeur, the servant, and the gentleman hurled him away simultaneously.

André Fridou staggered back and collapsed in the gutter — as limp as a rag, yet laughing uproariously all the while.

He lay on the wet street, clutching the brooch with a hand whose fingers had been painfully pricked, and laughed until the limousine vanished, until the house door was closed. The very darkness and emptiness of the avenue now seemed to glower upon him indignantly for his unseemly mirth.

Soon he picked himself up and reeled onward. And the brooch lay in his pocket, while in his mind lay a vision of a pallid, beautiful countenance that had gaped at him in horror.

FRIDOU actually did receive a thousand francs for his evening's services.

Twenty minutes after the theft it was given to him, in a small office to which he was conducted at Number

13 Rue Chinois. This room was in the cellar; it boasted nothing more pretentious than a roll-top desk and a swivel chair, in which Monsieur Seizic was sitting.

"So !" he said, as he tendered the thousand francs. "How do you like your first night's work ?"

"Too wet," answered Fridou, accepting the money. "How do you like the brooch ?"

Monsieur Seizic replied with a silent smile. He was in evening clothes, strangely, and regarded the pickpocket quite benevolently.

"You see," he said, "we play fair and we expect our men to do the same. Had you tried to dispose of that brooch, you would have been shot or arrested. Shot, in all probability. For we watch our men, you understand. And now, here you have a thousand francs !"

Fridou grinned contentedly. He counted the money on the desk, spreading it out like a child admiring a toy. Then he swept it together and jammed it into his pocket.

"When do I get another ?" he asked.

"Ah, I cannot tell you now. But you will drop into the shop of Camillaud every day; if there is work for you to do, he will tell you to come here. And I will give you details."

"Name of a million complications !" protested the pickpocket. "Can't I come straight here ? Must I go for orders to that lizard ?"

Monsieur Seizic shook his head, still smiling.

"No, my friend. I do not like unnecessary callers

here. It may attract attention, you understand. My men must always play safe, for the police — well ——"

"I thought," derisively snapped Fridou, "you had influence with the police !"

"Not quite enough, not quite enough. One never has quite enough — in such cases."

With alacrity the soaked Fridou jumped up, adjusted his rakish cap. It was clear that the interview had ended, and so he prepared to go.

But at the door, opened for him by Monsieur Seizic, he paused and looked around inquisitively at the man.

"Say," he asked, "what is this organization I'm getting into ? Or is it — just you ?"

In Monsieur Seizic's smile a slight change was visible, like a shadow.

"My good friend," he said, "what doesn't concern you doesn't concern you. Good-night !"

A gentle yet firm hand pushed André Fridou across the threshold. And a minute later the pickpocket was out on the black slope of the Rue Chinois. It was raining, cold; from the distant church floated the slow and dreary knell of eleven o'clock. Fridou pushed his hands into his pockets and walked off, an odd, intense smile on his lips. He was fingering the thousand francs and a slip of paper among them, a white slip of paper he had scooped up from the desk together with the bills, after that eager counting.

At a quarter past midnight the Minister of Police, Monsieur Vaudebain, arrived at the brilliant ball given by his confrère, the Minister of Education. Monsieur

Vaudebain, with his square grey beard more severe than ever, did not arrive alone, however. He came accompanied by his guest of the evening, an impeccably groomed gentleman who bore himself with a rather enviable grace.

The Minister of Police immediately presented the stranger to his host as Mr. Barron Ixell of New York.

CHAPTER VI

PEOPLE OF NOTE

THERE was one sequestered corner in the ballroom — a little nook cosily sheltered by potted palms — in which Monsieur Vaudebain and Barron Ixell seated themselves comfortably for a most important conference.

From this point of vantage they could command a full view of the resplendent crowd on the dance floor; they could watch the orchestra on the balcony; they could observe those who entered the main door, directly opposite them. And yet they enjoyed privacy within the arbor of palms.

For a while Barron Ixell spoke little. Brows contracted, a peculiar smile on his lips, he was gazing out upon that vista of blazing color. Gaiety here — just as there was gaiety on the Rue Haute. But there were as many varieties of gaiety, it seemed, as there were streets.

The women dancing about the floor offered a blending, criss-crossing design of infinite colors. Gowns, blue, red, gold, green, and white, swimming about in a perpetual whirlpool of dance; and in it all the glow of bare arms and shoulders. And there were the men

— patterns in black and white. But some of them bore dazzling decorations and the vivid sashes of mighty orders — sashes that ran from shoulder to waist in crimson stripes.

There were men in uniform, too, soldiers of the highest rank, be-medalled and be-ribboned; and other uniforms, as glorious as peacock plumes, that encased the nobility.

Promptly at twelve-thirty the music ceased, the dancing paused, the noise subsided. *Son Altesse Royale,* the Duke of Brabant, had arrived to represent his father, the King. A moment of salute, of bows, of courtesies; the orchestra played *La Brabançonne* — then, on with the dance !

"It doesn't resemble a society that is suffering the sting of a violent criminal crowd, does it ?" ventured Ixell.

Monsieur Vaudebain smiled whimsically.

"No," he admitted, "yet I can pick out twenty — thirty — people here who have felt the touch of the Circle of Terror." The Minister leaned toward the American. "You promised," he said, "to tell me what you have been doing since yesterday."

"I've been playing pickpocket. I —— "

Of a sudden Barron Ixell stopped, sat erect. He pushed his head forward and directed a keen stare toward a face that had appeared in the entrance of an ante-chamber. An oval face it was, pallid, framed by raven-black hair tightly drawn down about the ears. A beautiful face, too, with a hint of Greek hauteur in

its fine lines. The American recognized her; she was the lady of the brooch.

"Who is that ?" he whispered, catching the wrist of Monsieur Vaudebain.

A little startled, the Minister adjusted his pince-nez and gaped across the hall.

"Oh — that very attractive lady ?" he said. "She is Madame Lecour."

"Lecour !" gasped Ixell. *"Lecour !"*

"But yes. Why does that surprise you ?"

The American shot an oblique, excited glance at Monsieur Vaudebain.

"Do you mean she is the wife of your under-secretary ?"

Quickly the Minister shook his bearded head.

"Oh, no, not *his* wife. She is his brother's wife."

"Ah !"

A note of suspicion leapt into Monsieur Vaudebain's voice as he inquired:

"But why do you ask, Mr. Ixell ? Have you met —— "

"I ask," replied Ixell, still leaning forward, his eyes fastened on the woman, "because Madame Lecour is a member of the Circle of Terror !"

Something like a roar was crushed in the Minister's throat as he sprang to his feet — vibrant, flushed, almost indignant.

"But that is preposterous, Mr. Ixell ! You make a statement which —— "

Barron Ixell motioned Monsieur Vaudebain back

into his seat. He had scarcely heard the man's words, for now his questing eyes had discovered something else: Madame Lecour was wearing her diamond brooch !

"Such an accusation," began the Minister, flustered beyond control, "is untenable! Madame Lecour is a woman of position. Her husband — there, that grey-haired gentleman who has just stepped to her side — is one of the biggest private bankers in Bruxelles ! Do you think that she — that he —— "

"I know," softly insisted Barron Ixell, "that Madame Lecour is a member of the Circle of Terror, regardless of her social position ! Do you see that brooch she is wearing ? Well, two and a half hours ago it was stolen by André Fridou and delivered into the hands of an agent of the Circle ! Now it is back on Madame Lecour's gown ! That grey-haired gentleman, her husband and your under-secretary's brother, was present when the brooch was stolen. Has the theft been reported to the police ?"

Rather limply Monsieur Vaudebain sank back in his chair. These disclosures, shocking and bewildering, had left a moisture upon his forehead which he brushed away with an unsteady hand.

"No — o," he said. "So far as I know, nothing was reported."

"Nor will it be. The Circle of Terror tonight spent one thousand francs in order to enlist the future services and good will of a clever man with dependable fingers. It is lavish in securing its talent — but it

wants the best ! And André Fridou had established a reputation that caught its eye."

Ixell, turning to peer narrowly at the Minister, let his tones fall to a terse whisper as he continued:

"Our friend André Fridou has succeeded in locating two strongholds of the Circle of Terror. One is a little hovel in the Rue Chinois; the other a splendid home on the Avenue du Toison d'Or ! He has also identified three important members of that Circle: Monsieur and Madame Lecour, and a man who calls himself Monsieur Seizic. Besides them, he has a fence named Camillaud and an old hag whose name doesn't matter. These are the things Fridou has accomplished since yesterday !"

He paused, for two men had stopped directly in front of their palm-canopied haven. By the time they moved on, the pallid lady had vanished with her escort.

Dumbfounded and perhaps a little dazed, Monsieur Vaudebain sat fingering a decoration on his breast. He was still wide-eyed, but his first surge of indignation had subsided.

"You are certain of what you say, Mr. Ixell ?" he mumbled.

"Quite. Fridou worked his way far up into things, I'm beginning to see." The American searched the throng for another glimpse of the pale lady, but she was not to be seen. "You say," he queried, "that they are rich, these Lecours ?"

"But of course !" asserted Monsieur Vaudebain, un-

consciously striving to protect the couple with his tones. "Maurice Lecour is a most successful banker. He comes of an estimable family — a very estimable family. It was through family influence, in a way, that Richard Lecour, my under-secretary, achieved his present high post in the Department. In fact, I should not be surprised to find Richard Lecour holding my portfolio some day. Especially now, with poor Fragmont dying."

Barron Ixell jerked himself to a rigid position.

"Fragmont dying !" he cried softly.

Gravely Monsieur Vaudebain nodded.

"That bullet wound," he murmured, "is proving more serious than they had at first believed. It cut close to the heart — too close."

Queerly, Ixell had paled slightly. Perhaps he held himself responsible for Fragmont's calamity, since it was his ruse which had sent the under-secretary to the dock. His lips clamped together in a tight line.

"Dying . . ." he muttered again.

"Yes, in the Hospital St. Hubert at Antwerp. I had a telephone call from the physicians at nine this evening." The Minister shook his head slowly, grimly. "They told me he regains consciousness for a few minutes at a time, then goes off into a coma again. They give him another day to live."

"Good heavens !" Ixell stiffly gripped the arms of his chair. After a while he asked, "Has he been able to describe the man he tried to arrest ? Have any of the policemen been able to do so ?"

Monsieur Vaudebain indulged in his characteristic shrug.

"Oh, we have descriptions of the fellow — but they might fit any of two million men in the kingdom. Just a common type."

"It's a pity," said Ixell. "It's a pity! A man like Fragmont, who has risen so high in the Department, to be shot by a rowdy gang! They employ expert gunmen, that Circle of Terror — experts in every line, as Seizic said. I — I hope Fragmont pulls through."

"He is probably the best informed man I ever had."

"And he ——"

But whatever Barron Ixell had been about to say died on his tongue. For at that instant three people strolled past the cosy nook — three people who made him stare: Madame Lecour, her husband, and *Monsieur Seizic!*

Yes, the round-faced, stout little man of the Rue Chinois, with his bristling pompadour. In evening clothes, with a scarlet ribbon in his buttonhole, he looked quite dapper as his countenance beamed upon the colorful gathering.

He was chatting amiably with the other two when, of a sudden, Madame Lecour's slim hand sprang to his arm and squeezed it. She had glanced into the corner.

The three men halted, looking straight at Barron Ixell and Monsieur Vaudebain.

Ixell felt a strange thumping within him. Would they recognize André Fridou, the shabby, slouching pickpocket, in the elegant person of this American?

As he rose, he doubted it. And yet he spied queer, puzzled shadows in the expressions of those three before him.

"Present me," he whispered to the Minister of Police.

And a moment later he was being introduced to Madame and Monsieur Lecour, and to the plump gentleman who he learned was Monsieur Hellespeur.

During the first few minutes he stood chatting with them of wholly inconsequential matters, he was persistently aware of the perplexity behind their calm poise. There were times when he caught the suggestion of a searching frown in Madame Lecour's eyes; times when he surprised an uneasy light in the round face of Monsieur Hellespeur.

They clung to him, somehow — and he was glad. For he had come to the ball with the express purpose of meeting the pallid lady, of talking to her. Outwardly, they formed an amiable, jolly group; but beneath their flippant attitudes coursed a tingling undercurrent of mutual suspicion.

How like that drunkard this American seemed, if one observed his face closely! How like Fridou! And yet —— No, it really was an absurd idea. Fridou here, at nobility's ball? Impossible! That ragged, loud-mouthed scamp was now probably groveling in some vile den on the Rue Haute, drinking himself unconscious with a thousand francs.

These thoughts Ixell could sense passing through the troubled mind of Monsieur Hellespeur. They were reflected in the man's uncertain eyes.

Yet smiles persisted like masks; the minutes wore on, and in half an hour Barron Ixell was leading the pallid lady through a glorious, rolling waltz.

She looked up at him while they danced, her pale, lovely face apparently exuding the ecstasy of the waltz. And he talked to her of idle things — until he noticed, presently, that time after time she glanced at his left hand, the hand which held hers.

About this he wondered; when the music stopped, and he applauded, the wonder increased.

For he saw the thing at which Madame Lecour had been darting her glances: tiny scratches on his fingers, incurred because of Fridou's awkwardness in detaching the brooch !

They danced again. And suddenly Ixell's wonder vanished.

He had looked down at Madame Lecour's brooch. It blazed on her bosom; but just behind it, shielded by the gem, Barron Ixell spied small red flecks — blood flecks he himself had left on her white gown !

His eyes encountered hers. They continued to dance. They continued to smile. Yet each of them understood now, and their smiles were as cutting as daggers.

CHAPTER VII

DO IT NOW

TEN seconds after he had left Madame Lecour with her husband, Barron Ixell dragged the startled Minister of Police into the privacy of the corridor.

"Monsieur Vaudebain," he announced, somewhat breathless and flushed, "I had thought it would take us weeks to break the Circle of Terror. But — we're going to do it tonight !"

The Minister gaped, his pince-nez dropping from his nose and saved from a crash only by the black ribbon on which it hung.

"Tonight, Mr. Ixell ?"

"Now, immediately. The hoax is ended. That woman knows I am Fridou !"

"No !"

"And you must place her and her husband under arrest before they leave this hall !"

That news wholly confounded Monsieur Vaudebain. He drew back, his Egyptian beard raised. He lifted his hands and shoulders, stuttered something. But Ixell insisted:

"I tell you they will attempt to leave soon. If we

let them go, they will have half a dozen gunmen trailing me — and you, as well, in all probability — from the instant we step out of here. If they so much as reach a telephone, they'll start the machinery of murder working."

"But, good heavens, Mr. Ixell, how can I cause such scandal here ? At an affair of this sort, to arrest two of the guests —— "

"Three," corrected Ixell, confidently. "You must arrest that Hellespeur, too."

"Hellespeur ! But he departed while you were dancing !"

That information evoked a dismayed exclamation from Barron Ixell. He snapped his fingers and, catching the Minister unceremoniously by the arm, strode off toward the cloak room.

"We might have expected it," he muttered. "They've been terrified. The woman must have nodded to him over my shoulder — signalled him somehow that I was the man." He called for his hat and coat, and felt his back pocket which carried the weight of a flat, efficient American automatic. "We should have acted quicker !"

All this agitation had confused and bewildered the Minister of Police, so that he demanded with some testiness:

"And where are *you* rushing, if you please ?"

"I ? I'm following Hellespeur — Seizic — to the Rue Chinois !"

"The Rue Chinois ! What makes you think —— ?"

"The Number is 13, Monsieur Vaudebain," crisply

said Barron Ixell as he slipped into his coat. "Number 13 Rue Chinois. In that hovel the Circle of Terror keeps whatever records it has. I saw the book on Seizic's desk. And I'll stake my life that he has gone to get them — to clear out in case of emergency !"

They had already reached the door, and Ixell signalled the footman to summon the automobile of Monsieur Vaudebain. And while he waited, he quickly whispered to the astounded Minister:

"I'm sorry that so much chaos must be caused, but it is the only way to smash the Circle of Terror tonight. We must do it now ! By tomorrow — within half an hour even — it may be too late. They will have destroyed or concealed whatever incriminating records that house in the Rue Chinois holds. Do you understand, Monsieur Vaudebain ? Now, about arresting the Lecours — it is imperative ! Call some policemen; have the Lecours summoned out here, and you can carry them off without any one in the ballroom being aware of it. Don't worry about them making any indignant outcries. They'll be more desirous of silence than you !"

He turned as the Minister's car rolled to the door. Outside it was still raining, and he buttoned the overcoat snugly about his neck.

"Monsieur Vaudebain," he finished, "I am going to Number 13 Rue Chinois — where Fridou was welcome but where Ixell may — well, fall into a little trouble. I shall appreciate it, Monsieur, if you get to a telephone and send a few policemen to follow me. I don't know how many I may encounter in that den."

He peered down into the Minister's eyes. And in that steady gaze Monsieur Vaudebain found something which steadied him. He swelled his chest, attained his customary poise. Even the suspicion of an appreciative smile lurked under his square beard.

"Mr. Ixell," he said quietly, "your methods are astounding, but I like them ! It is as you say; much as I regret the necessity, the Lecours will be placed under arrest within two minutes ! And I shall send a detachment of police to the address . . ."

He stopped talking, for Barron Ixell had already bounded down the steps to disappear within the long limousine.

An instant Monsieur Vaudebain tarried there, allowing the rain to sprinkle him, while the car rolled swiftly away. Then, turning, he adjusted his pincenez. There was work to be done — wretched yet important work. And Monsieur Vaudebain never shirked.

But a most disturbing thought had entered his mind: could it be that a woman like Madame Lecour, or a man like her husband, or Hellespeur, was the brains of the Circle of Terror ? Or was there another — a superior, guiding, malignant intelligence to be found ?

Well, perhaps Barron Ixell could answer that. As for himself, he had no time to ponder. There was work waiting to be done.

CHAPTER VIII

IN THE TUNNEL

WITHIN fifteen minutes Barron Ixell stood pounding at the door of Number 13 Rue Chinois.

The rain pattered down on his silk hat, soaked his coat, splashed dismally in the black alley. Beside him stood the Minister's chauffeur, shivering in the miserable weather, while he glanced back, perhaps yearningly, at his own automobile and at the other car directly in front of it. The headlights of this second machine glared brilliantly against the ancient factory wall, the rain dropping through its beams like so many sparkling diamonds.

"They won't open," said Ixell, to the chauffeur. "Come on, help me break it in !"

And so, together, they threw themselves at the old, decaying door. Five times, six times, they made the onslaught — and suddenly the thing gave way, flying inward with a crash.

Ixell plunged into the blackness. He remembered precisely how to reach that cellar office — for André Fridou had taken particular note of the way. And as he ran, he drew his automatic.

The chauffeur attempted to follow him, but after a few steps he remained groping blindly in the dark. He called. There was no answer. So he turned back to seek the street door.

Down a rickety staircase went Ixell, peering ahead with catlike eyes as he clattered on the steps. He landed on a stone floor, turned — and saw light.

Yellow, dreary light — the gas light of that office! His gun levelled, his finger tensed about the trigger, he approached that weird glow slowly, with cautious treads. Not within the lane of that sickly luminosity, but close to the walls, in blackness, he proceeded, until at last he attained the open door.

He thrust the gun forward, then proceeded. Inch by inch he pressed into the light, wondering why no shot greeted him. Then he was able to see the bleak room, to look into it.

The place was empty!

A mutter of disappointment escaped him. Now he could enter boldly and stare about; the roll-top desk was open — its contents gone!

So Hellespeur had been here, had taken the things and gone, fled with whatever incriminating data might have been discovered.

Suddenly Ixell leaped toward the far wall, his eyes shining in excited hope. He had spied a black streak there — an opening!

With his foot he pushed against the stone wall, and delight gleamed in his face as he saw a great slab of it give, quite easily. As it swung back, it revealed a dark, twisting passage, leading he did not know where.

Yet of one thing he was certain; by this route Hellespeur — or Seizic — had departed. Possibly the tunnel led into the old factory at the end of the Rue Chinois . . .

Ixell ran into the passageway. For twenty yards he had a faint light from behind to guide him; afterwards, the tunnel twisted abruptly to the right, passed through a second open door, and became black. It was like traversing a sewer. He now advanced slowly, step by step, feeling his way along the wall. He decided that the light of a match might help now, and dipped his left hand into his pocket.

Yet even as he raised that match, a queer premonition assailed him, causing him to feel suddenly cold with uncertain fear. He knew that someone was awaiting him just ahead !

Had he heard a faint sound ? He held his breath, the gun aimed straight into the darkness. He dared not stir.

Perhaps that other presence was seeking a target, as he was seeking a target. The slightest sound now would furnish one.

Ixell's hand returned to his pocket and brought out half a dozen matches. He poised himself, then threw the little sticks forward, diagonally across the passageway. They landed with a light patter some six feet away.

And then it came — the deafening thunder of a revolver, the dart of yellow flame. A bullet cracked against the wall just where the matches had fallen !

Ixell's automatic roared through the echo of the first

shot. Straight at the spurt of flame he had aimed.

He heard a deep, low groan, like a growl. There was the metallic fall of a revolver, a heavier, duller thud — then stillness.

A few seconds later he tiptoed forward until his foot struck a soft, yielding substance. He paused and ventured to light a match.

The small flame danced merrily at his finger tips, and as he lowered it, a circle of flickering yellow light hung in the tunnel. It disclosed a few papers on the stone floor. And it disclosed also the corpulent body of Monsieur Seizic — in immaculate evening attire.

Across his chest that gentleman wore the red sash of the Order of Death.

CHAPTER IX

WHO IS THE BRAINS?

MONSIEUR VAUDEBAIN held a most trying inquest at noon the following day.

Scowling through his pince-nez at a pile of papers on his desk, he mumbled to himself a while, then looked up at those seated in a semi-circle on the other side of that historic black desk.

Madame Lecour was there, with two policemen to escort her. She sat expressionless, pallid, her hands folded in her lap. Her eyes were round, seemingly blind to everything in the spacious chamber. Her raven hair was drawn as tightly as ever over her ears; and though she had presumably passed a sleepless night, she evinced no line of weariness in her smooth countenance.

Beside her, and also under the surveillance of two policemen, sat her grey-haired husband. Unlike her, he appeared exhausted, broken. He could not remain still, but continually writhed, while his fingers crawled through his hair.

Monsieur Vaudebain cleared his throat. He adjusted the pince-nez and peered through it as his hand sank to stroke his square, severe beard. In the door

stood his under-secretary, Lecour — tall, gaunt, haggard. His olive skin looked deathly sick, and he trembled like one in the first stages of palsy. No policeman watched him, for he had not been placed under arrest. He had merely come to protest this sacrilege.

"We have here," slowly said Monsieur Vaudebain, "certain papers which were found last night upon the body of Guillaume Hellespeur. They supply no names. Yet they do supply records of various pieces of jewelry which have vanished in the past few months. The fact that Monsieur Hellespeur was in possession of such papers might or might not count against him — were he alive. But the fact that he *died* in an effort to dispose of them counts for much."

The Minister of Police paused, for he had been harshly interrupted by his under-secretary.

"Monsieur," snapped Lecour, entering the room, "since it is my brother and my sister-in-law who are facing you on this — this unthinkable charge, I claim the right to intervene for them ! You say — Mr. Ixell charges — that they are members of the Circle of Terror ! Where have you proof of such an assertion ? Where have you grounds for this arrest ? Merely Mr. Ixell's theories ? It is outrageous, Monsieur Vaudebain ! You cannot hold them —— "

The Minister raised his hand.

"I think," he said, "we may expect Mr. Ixell himself within a few minutes. He promised to be here at twelve-thirty — to *substantiate* those theories."

The Minister leaned back and looked at his watch. For fifteen minutes he patiently listened to Lecour's

denunciations, bitter and at times verging on hysteria, of the baseless charge that had brought his relatives here. That they should be apprehended as the leaders of so unspeakable an organization as the Circle of Terror was a piece of utter madness!

Lecour was still talking when finally Barron Ixell arrived.

The American had left his hat and coat outside. He appeared now in a simple grey business suit — a very businesslike man with a very businesslike way. And yet, under his confident briskness, he seemed oddly upset, even slightly unnerved.

He dropped a brief case upon the black desk. At Madame Lecour, that immobile goddess in wax, he glanced once. She returned the look unemotionally, though her husband mumbled something.

"Monsieur Vaudebain," quietly reported Ixell as he accepted the chair to which the Minister waved, "the Circle of Terror is destroyed." He spoke like a man who has completed an unforgettable task. He crossed his legs, folded his hands in his lap, and fixed his gaze on the woman.

Somewhat uneasily Monsieur Vaudebain stirred.

"Mr. Ixell," he began, not without hesitation, "this morning you told me that at noon you would be able to produce proof of the guilt of — these people. We have been holding them, but they demand to know just why, on what grounds —— "

Grimacing a little, Ixell took the brief case into his lap. Slowly he opened it, extracted a sheaf of papers, and placed them before the Minister.

"I have the proof here, Monsieur Vaudebain. Perhaps everyone would care to have me explain its contents, and how I procured these papers ?"

Quite suddenly and unexpectedly the arrested Lecour jumped up, wagging a wild finger at the papers and crying:

"Those things, whatever they are, are lies ! Impossible lies !" The policemen at his sides forced him down again, but he continued to shout defiance. "There can be no proof of something which never happened !"

Ixell directed a level, unwavering look at the man.

"You shall judge for yourself," he said slowly. "There is proof and it is unquestionable proof because I have obtained it from the *brains of* the Circle !"

Monsieur Lecour was evidently on the verge of another explosion. Yet Ixell's uncompromising stare, his firm, confident tones, and his whole calm demeanor somehow disheartened the banker. He sagged a little, gulped, said nothing. As for Madame Lecour, that pallid lady persistently refused to stir.

Ixell turned back to the Minister.

"Within the past two hours," he said, "I have uncovered the head of the Circle of Terror. I have gone to its creator, its motivating force, its brains. Let me tell you about him — and about *it*."

He bent forward slightly, his eyes fastened on the Minister.

"We must start a year ago," he continued. "At that time Monsieur Maurice Lecour, private banker, found himself in a great deal of secret trouble. He had in-

judiciously spent — or to be more exact, he had lost in speculation — several million francs which belonged to his clients, not to him. As a consequence, he faced prison, were the news to become public."

And now, for the first time, a suspicion of color mounted into the cheeks of the pallid lady ! Ixell saw it from the corners of his eyes and went on evenly:

"Monsieur Lecour, happily, had a clever wife and a valuable, shall we say sympathizer ? Yes, a valuable sympathizer in the Department of Police !" The last phrase widened Monsieur Vaudebain's gape, yet the American proceeded implacably:

"It was this friend, this sympathizer, who was responsible for the creation of the Circle of Terror. He had access to all criminal records. He himself, indeed, was a great student of criminology and had a thorough knowledge of most of the criminal talent in Belgium and France. He had the record of almost every criminal in the underworld of Paris. And when Monsieur Lecour, after borrowing and raising as much money as possible in other ways, found himself still a million or so short, it was this powerful sympathizer who conceived the notion of gathering that million — illegally."

Barron Ixell paused, looking for an instant at every stupefied countenance in the room. Then he resumed in that quiet voice:

"The idea had been in the man's head for many years — at least, he had been aware of its mighty possibility. Until now, however, he had never found either

the courage or the stimulus to enact it. Once he had those — well, he plunged.

"He learned of Monsieur Lecour's plight on a visit to the Lecour home. The Lecours were desperate. Anything seemed preferable to prison and disgrace, especially to Madame Lecour. So the man in the Department of Police, the sympathizer, as we had better call him, had little trouble in securing accomplices in his mighty venture. Within a month the Circle of Terror had been born.

"It was an association of thieves, skillful thieves, the best there were. Its organizer knew them through the records of the Department. He knew enough of criminal psychology to understand them — and to master them.

"But, being shrewd, he did not do all this directly. Oh, no. He needed an intermediary, an agent, a go-between. So he found a man of apparent respectability, but a man who was so low in funds that he owed much to Monsieur Lecour's bank. This man's profession was gambling at Monte Carlo during the seasons — and borrowing during the off-season. His name was Hellespeur. It was not long before Monsieur Hellespeur, enticed by a vision of easy wealth, joined the Circle.

"Through him the organization proceeded — though at the commands of the brains in the Department of Police. Within a few weeks it numbered more than twenty-five experts in various lines of criminal endeavor. It began to operate. The Lecours furnished

what we might call the plans of their upper world. The leader furnished the brains. The hirelings furnished the skill. And things went beautifully for months. Everyone profited enormously. And there was your Circle of Terror."

Having achieved this midpoint in his account, Barron Ixell again surveyed his audience. Monsieur Vaudebain sat quite drawn, stroking his beard, scowling at the papers on his black desk. His undersecretary, Lecour, had fallen into a chair out of which he now gaped with eyes that were smouldering coals. His gaunt, Corsican countenance was a thing of bones and shadows.

Madame Lecour, more rigid than ever, had lost some of her pallor. In truth, her face appeared blazing hot; but she kept her lips firm and grim. Her husband, however, could not control himself so remarkably well. He squirmed, inwardly and outwardly, a miserable man who bit his lip in an effort to suppress his feelings.

"Please, Mr. Ixell, go on," said the Minister of Police, stiffly.

Ixell nodded.

"The strength — and ultimately the weakness — of the Circle's leader was this: None of his underlings knew him, save the Lecours and Hellespeur! Through Hellespeur he concealed his identity even from those who worked for him, so that if ever a crash came, he would not be identified with the band. You understand that, Monsieur Vaudebain? — It is important. If ever the Department arrested a member of

the Circle, that member would be unable to babble anything of importance. He might tell of a Monsieur Seizic, through whom he had received his orders; but he would not know Monsieur Seizic's real name, Hellespeur, and there the trail would end. You understand, Monsieur ?"

"Perfectly," said the Minister. "Continue, if you please."

But before going on, Ixell saw that the Lecours, with every word, were more and more losing control of themselves. The pallid cheeks were now red; the grey-haired man seemed ready to bound out of his chair, about to scream. The facts of the case were being poured over them like so much molten, white-hot lead.

"Very well," said Ixell. "The Circle of Terror functioned well for many months. Twice, during that period, clever detectives began to scent its trail. They reported to the Department. Of course, their reports reached the Circle's leader, himself a member of the Department. Within a few days those enterprising detectives were found shot — dead. The Circle had protected itself."

And now Monsieur Lecour, the banker, actually started up, but authoritative hands pressed him back.

"Lies !" he gasped. "Lies — all lies !"

"We shall see," Ixell went on, a quality of doggedness in his low tones. "The Circle of Terror made no mistakes until it sought the services of an apparently skillful pickpocket named André Fridou. He appeared one day, a fugitive from Paris, and showed him-

self to be so expert in his line that the Circle tried to enlist him. That was the way the Circle stabbed itself to death.

"I need not go through Fridou's activities. It is enough to say that they culminated this morning in these events: the arrest of one Jules Camillaud, fence and agent of the Circle; the arrest of an old hag found on the top floor of 13 Rue Chinois; the death of Monsieur Hellespeur; the arrest of the Lecours; and the finding of the Circle's leader !"

Again Ixell's swift gaze swept the room, the group of shocked, dumbfounded faces. Then he said.

"I am happy to say that Jules Camillaud, a snaky man at best, has turned State's evidence to save himself. He has given us a list of names of those hirelings of the Circle who committed the actual crimes. Through his close association with Hellespeur, or Seizic, he knew them all. In fact, it was his duty to notify them when there were orders at 13 Rue Chinois. He is in prison. The list he gave is among those papers on your desk, Monsieur Vaudebain. I am sure your Department will act upon it quickly."

With a furious roar the accused banker struggled out of his chair once more, waving a trembling fist at the American. He was livid; a storm had been roused within him, a devastating storm.

"All this doesn't prove anything against us !" he shouted. "There is no proof ! There isn't——"

"Ah, but I am coming to that," interrupted Ixell. And the steadiness of his voice made Lecour collapse, blinking haggardly. "I told you I have, within the

past two hours, received the truth from the head of the Circle. You will find it all in those papers, the entire story, with his signature appended. Also, there are certain letters written to him by Madame and Monsieur Lecour which establish their guilt beyond debate. I am certain they will know what letters I mean. He was wise enough to keep them — as a sort of club over their heads in any emergency. You understand ?"

This time it was the Minister of Police who jumped to his feet — vibrant, rigid, his fist smashing down on the desk like a gavel. Through his pince-nez he fastened a drilling, piercing look upon Barron Ixell. His bearded head was pushed forward, and in lashing tones he snapped.

"Mr. Ixell, from all you have said I can form but one conclusion. For I can think of but one man who could have wielded the power you suggest. Are you naming, as the leader and the brains of the Circle of Terror, my under-secretary, Richard Lecour ?"

There was a terrible note in the query. It forced stillness upon the office, a stillness that was deafening, choking. Slowly the under-secretary rose, a gaunt, quivering man, appalled and terrified. Both he and the Minister stared at Ixell, with eyes that stabbed.

But Barron Ixell shook his head.

"No," he said quietly. "I am not accusing Monsieur Lecour. He had no knowledge and no connection with the matter of the Circle of Terror."

"Eh ?" gasped Monsieur Vaudebain. "Not — not —— Then, in the name of Heaven, who ——"

"The organizer and leader of the Circle of Terror,"

simply went on Ixell, "is your other under-secretary — Monsieur Fragmont."

That name was a stunning blow upon the whole office.

It made both the Minister and Lecour fall back, aghast. It made the arrested couple become as motionless as statues.

"I have just come from him," said Ixell. "I saw him in the hospital at Antwerp, where he is expected to die before evening. When I told him all I knew, he collapsed. Perhaps he wanted to clear himself as much as possible before going to a Higher Court. Like Camillaud, he turned State's evidence to save as much of his soul as possible. Those papers are his story."

"But — but — he was *shot!*" blurted Monsieur Vaudebain. "Shot by the Circle —— "

Ixell nodded.

"I told you the hiding of his identity was a weak as well as a strong point. On the day the *Stateland* arrived, Monsieur Hellespeur acted without official orders in sending gunmen to the pier. Fragmont went there because his position required him to do so — he always strove to be the dependable servant of the Department. But his underlings did not know their leader. He did not know his underlings would be there. You know the result."

Through his pince-nez Monsieur Vaudebain stared blankly for a full minute. Then, faltering, he demanded:

"How did you — know ?"

Ixell smiled wanly.

"Fridou learned the truth," he said. "When he was paid a thousand francs for a piece of knavery, he counted the money on Seizic's desk. He scooped the money up — and with it a note he had seen there. That note was handwritten; a certain little order for Seizic from his chief. And the handwriting corresponded with the handwriting I found on some sheets you gave me, Monsieur Vaudebain. You remember you gave me copies of the data concerning the Circle. On it you, Lecour, and Fragmont had each added a few handwritten notations. You see? Unfortunately, it was impossible for me to interview Fragmont until two hours ago. He was unconscious."

Barron Ixell drew a long, slow breath.

"After all," he said, "the trick of the newspaper item did *not* end in failure . . ."

There was a short silence. Then three things happened:

Monsieur Lecour, the banker, dashed upon Ixell and had to be hurled upon the floor by his guards, where he was held down by knees and hands while he writhed like a wounded beast.

Monsieur Lecour, the under-secretary, lowered his face into his hands and began to sob like a child.

And Madame Lecour, that pallid lady, looked up at the ceiling and laughed, laughed shrilly, insanely, hysterically, her whole body shaking, so that one policeman rushed off for water.

Barron Ixell rose and faced the minister of Police.

"I have the honor to report the case closed, Monsieur Vaudebain," he said softly.

But Monsieur Vaudebain did not hear. He was too busy gathering his scattered senses and trying to adjust his awry pince-nez.

THE DEVIL'S PIGEONS

THE DEVIL'S PIGEONS

CHAPTER I

"MONSIEUR SATAN"

WHEN the telephone rang, Ixell wearily tossed aside the book he had been reading and sighed in frank disappointment. He had been hoping — altogether uselessly, he now realized — for an evening of tranquillity and repose in his hotel room; since his arrival in Paris, two weeks ago, he had found little opportunity to rest. And so he had cherished the promise of this evening's solitude quite avidly. But the tinkle of the bell destroyed all anticipations; it presaged, he felt, either another visitor or another invitation. His expression was candidly rueful as he answered the call.

It changed immediately, however, when he distinguished the staccato voice of Detective Fleriot.

For a moment after Barron Ixell had replied, the wire brought only a confused, unintelligible rumble, as if many men were in agitated conversation at its other end. Then Fleriot's tones sharply cracked through the hum:

"M'sieu' Ixell ! There has been another development in the 'Monsieur Satan' case !"

Abruptly, Ixell's tall figure straightened from its lethargic droop. He frowned. The slender panatela he had been rolling between idle fingertips was caught stiffly.

"What has happened ?" he asked. "And where ?" The curt inflection of his words was a complete repudiation of his recent languor.

Detective Fleriot's news came briskly: "At the Hotel Dulac, m'sieu'. An American — a Mr. Rodney Arnold — has received the usual caged pigeon. He notified the Prefecture five minutes ago."

"So !" said Ixell. "And what does 'Monsieur Satan' want this time ?"

"A lavallière. But *tiens,* m'sieu' —— " Fleriot spoke hurriedly. "I have been assigned to the case, and I am starting for the Hotel Dulac now. Shall I pick you up on the way ?"

"Please do," urged Ixell. "And thank you, Fleriot !"

When he had replaced the instrument, Barron Ixell remained still for a time, peering down at the grey tip of his cigar. Thoughtful ridges crossed his forehead, and his rather long countenance had assumed a stern tautness. He moved to the window presently and smoked while he looked out over the light-spangled vastness of the Champs Elysées. There was no moon this evening; a wind, noisy in the swaying trees, brought the threat of rain.

With unseeing eyes — eyes focussed inwardly — Ixell watched the gleaming automobile traffic that purred along the splendid boulevard. Paris lifted its unend-

ing roar to him, but he heard nothing. He was thinking of the latest monstrosity this city of infinite possibilities had produced: the creature newspapers had aptly, if somewhat luridly, named "Monsieur Satan."

But the time was unpropitious for meditation; Detective Fleriot, on his way from the Prefecture, would arrive in a few minutes. Ixell turned from the window and exchanged his dressing gown for a grey jacket.

As he stood in the entrance of his hotel, leaning on his cane and awaiting the Police Department automobile which must bring the tempestuous though able Armand Fleriot, he was conscious of several significant nods toward his trim back. Apparently, he was not wholly unknown to the people in the lobby; but that was scarcely astonishing. On his arrival in Paris, Barron Ixell had been welcomed by more than one newspaper account which chronicled — in tones perhaps too laudatory and sensational for his ensuing comfort — his achievements in criminal research. One paper, with a bold leap into pompous nomenclature, had mentioned him as "an international criminologist," offering in support of its assertion the fact that his activities had encompassed New York, Bruxelles, and other cities.

Ixell suspected, amusedly, that his friend Fleriot had, in a large measure, been responsible for much of this detailed publicity. The effusive Prefecture detective had a flair of doing things with a fanfare and flourish — even in the matter of greeting old friends.

But the American criminal expert was becoming somewhat tired of the curious stares the newspaper articles had induced.

He yielded to a sense of relief when, finally, he sat beside Detective Fleriot in the back of a spacious open Department car. A chauffeur in police uniform sped them along the Avenue des Champs Elysées toward the looming majesty of the tremendous Arc de Triomphe.

"Eh, bien," said the Frenchman, "you wanted a chance to study 'Monsieur Satan.' You have it." He had a way of speaking in incisive, tight-lipped spurts, this thin-faced ace of the Prefecture. His countenance was hard; his eyes, squinting ahead to the Arc, were brilliant; and the small white moustache which formed a neat circumflex under his straight nose seemed as stiff as the bristles of a brush.

Ixell, silent, leaned back in his corner of the automobile, while the night wind whipped sparks from the tip of his cigar.

"Sapristi!" muttered Fleriot. "This is the fourth offense of that confounded 'Satan'! And always with his pigeons!"

A queer smile hovered about Barron Ixell's lips.

"It is a very clever idea," he observed, "and decidedly original. A criminal capable of conceiving something novel is always interesting. There are so few who can do it."

"Interesting?" snapped Fleriot, scowling. "It's devilish!" He glared at the lines of illumined shops between which they were gliding. The wind flapped

the broad brim of his felt hat, disclosing patches of white, closely trimmed hair at his temples. "Mind you, to send a man a homing pigeon and brazenly demand that he tie a lavillière of platinum and diamonds to the bird's leg !"

For a time neither of them spoke, after that ejaculation. Ixell regarded the immense bulk of the Arc de Triomphe around which the car was swiftly curving. His eye lingered on the wind-blown flame under the Napoleonic monument — a plume of fire destined to wave eternally over the grave of France's Unknown Soldier. Then he suddenly glanced at Fleriot.

"Suppose," he suggested quickly, "you tell me about this latest case. We'll be at the Dulac in a minute."

The detective shrugged eloquently. "I know only what was told me over the telephone. Mr. Rodney Arnold, an American, yesterday bought a valuable lavallière from Lamacor in the Rue de la Paix. You know the Maison Lamacor ?"

"By reputation," Ixell acknowledged, nodding.

"Today," went on Fleriot, his eyes narrow under a scowling forehead, "a large package was delivered at the Hotel Dulac for Mr. Arnold. When he opened it, he found the usual wooden cage with the homing pigeon in it. He says there was a note with a small bag attached to the cage."

"When," interrupted Ixell, peering ahead at the electric sign of the Hotel Dulac, "was the package delivered ?"

"This afternoon. But Mr. Arnold received it only this evening, when he returned to the hotel."

"And the note —— ?"

"Commanded him to place the lavallière in the bag, tie it to the pigeon's leg securely, and free the bird from his window. The usual note, you notice — and with the usual threat in case of failure to obey."

Fleriot stopped as the automobile rolled to the curb before the scintillant entrance of the Hotel Dulac. "Pah !" he muttered as they emerged. "Paris ! It was built by heaven and leased by hell !"

In the chamber of Rodney Arnold, they encountered a scene of mingled outrage and bewilderment. Four men were in the room, all of them gathered about a small wooden cage, palpably and crudely hand-fashioned, which occupied the centre of a table. In it an exceedingly nervous pigeon hopped about restlessly, terrified by the proximity of so many men. It could not realize, of course, that it was, itself, a source of terror.

Rodney Arnold, a young man who appeared to be more familiar with football tactics than with criminal procedure, stood with both his hands jammed doggedly in his trouser pockets. He was scowling; he had, apparently, been talking quite spiritedly before the arrival of Fleriot and Barron Ixell.

"Glad to know you, Mr. Ixell," he said in English when the Prefecture detective had presented the American criminologist. "And I'm mighty glad you're taking a hand in this crazy business. Never heard of anything like it ! Trying to terrorize me, this satanic bug-a-boo ! But I'll be hanged if I send even a counterfeit centime — to say nothing of the lavallière !"

Ixell smiled as he shook the blond young man's energetic hand. "Quite right, Mr. Arnold," he agreed. "It would be criminal to feed crime."

Through Fleriot, who seemingly knew everyone, he learned the identities of the other three men in the chamber. The bald, corpulent fellow in the atrocious brown suit was the detective of the Hotel Dulac. The massively molded and seriously frowning gentleman who was intently examining the cage was, Ixell discovered, Monsieur Deche, representative and investigator for an insurance company. And the third man proved to be Monsieur Lamacor, the jeweller of the Rue de la Paix.

"Yesterday," explained Rodney Arnold, "I insured the lavallière as soon as I bought it. I had a binder on it from the moment I walked out of Monsieur Lamacor's store. And so, when I found this note from your 'Monsieur Satan,' I called Lamacor immediately; he'd been telling me yesterday about this original cutthroat thief in Paris. He came right over with the insurance company's own detective."

Fleriot waved an authoritative hand as he threw his hat to a chair and revealed his gleaming white hair.

"You will pardon me, M'sieu' Arnold," he said, "but before we go any further, may I see the note you found on that cage ?"

Nodding readily, the young American produced the slip of paper from his pocket. Detective Fleriot held it up so that Ixell, too, might read it. The message was simple, concise, and hand-printed on what might have been a leaf of a notebook:

After you have placed into the attached bag the lavallière you purchased yesterday at the shop of Edmond Lamacor, tie the bag safely to the pigeon's leg and release the bird. If the bird does not return with the lavallière within twenty-four hours, you will, as the Prefecture itself can inform you, be shot.

"Let him *try* to get me !" challenged Rodney Arnold. "I'm leaving from Cherbourg for New York tomorrow morning !"

"Oh," slowly murmured Detective Fleriot, as he relinquished the note to Barron Ixell, "our 'Monsieur Satan' will doubtless try to shoot you before then. He always does, you know —— "

CHAPTER II

THE MENACE

FOR a moment, while Rodney Arnold uneasily licked his lips, there was silence — a strained, expectant silence, vaguely reminiscent of the hush before a gathering storm. It was not pleasant to know that, somewhere, some unknown force was pointing death at the young American.

Barron Ixell himself dispelled the momentary strain. He turned to the ponderous hotel detective.

"Does anyone know who brought this cage?" he asked.

The man raised his shoulders, arms, and even his brows in a mighty shrug. "No, m'sieu', I am afraid not," he answered regretfully. "The package was large and wrapped in heavy paper. Since Monsieur Arnold has been making many purchases in Paris and sending them to the hotel, the clerk at the desk suspected nothing. Consequently, he granted little attention to the deliverer."

"Then there is absolutely no description of him?" pressed Ixell.

"Oh, very uncertain, very uncertain," said the detective. "The clerk *thinks* the man had a heavy brown

moustache and was dressed decently. But he can't be sure. And nobody else noticed the fellow."

Ixell shook his head lamentably. As he tossed "Monsieur Satan's" note to the table, his long countenance was taut with a puzzled frown.

"Look here," abruptly expostulated Rodney Arnold, "I've been hearing all sorts of fantastic stories about this 'Satan' affair. Is it really so absurdly serious ? Do I have to hide under my bed all night, or is it all bluff ?"

He glared from Ixell to Detective Armand Fleriot. The white-headed Prefecture man, lithe and slender as a boy, despite his age, lifted the corners of his mouth in a hard, cynical smile.

"Shall I tell you just how serious it is ?" he suggested.

"I wish you would," snapped Arnold. "I haven't been so bewildered about anything since I asked my mother if there really was a Santa Claus."

"Ah," sighed Fleriot, "Americans jest even of death." A grim quality settled about his smile. "Very well, m'sieu'. Here is the *truth* about our latest Paris devil: Two months ago a caged homing pigeon, exactly like this one, was found on the veranda of Pierre Coli's home in St. Cloud. As Monsieur Lamacor, here, can tell you, Coli had a splendid jewellry shop just off the Place Vendome. He had bought, two days earlier, a valuable diamond brooch. 'Monsieur Satan' demanded that brooch in precisely the same manner he is demanding your lavallière. Naturally, Coli refused to obey. He was given police protection. In spite of

it, in four days, he was shot — to death — in his garden. We found no trace of the murderer."

"H'm," grumbled Rodney Arnold, scowling at the agitated bird.

"That," proceeded Detective Fleriot, "was the first case. Two weeks later, an Englishman, Walter Kant, bought diamond earrings in the Rue de la Paix. Within twenty-four hours *he* found a caged pigeon, a note, and a little bag outside the door of his sister's apartment, where he was stopping. He, too, disdained it. He, too, received police protection. One evening he walked out of his house — between two *agents de police,* mind — and he was shot from an automobile that whizzed past. He is still in the hospital. The doctors say he *may* recover."

Rodney Arnold brushed a rather unsteady hand across his forehead and glanced toward Barron Ixell. The American criminologist, however, appeared to be heeding the conversation only casually. With Detective Deche of the insurance company, he was closely inspecting the wooden bird cage.

"Cheerful sort of prospect for a man," muttered Arnold.

Fleriot went on in a ruthless monotone:

"On the third attempt at extortion, 'Monsieur Satan's' terrorism succeeded. Auguste de la Chalotte, a millionaire who received the next pigeon, preferred to surrender a pearl necklace of tremendous value instead of yielding his life. At any rate, his wife insisted on his granting the demands of the note. She had read, you see, of what had happened in previous

cases. Monsieur de la Chalotte sent the pearls off with the pigeon. Perhaps it was what you would consider cowardly. But today Monsieur de la Chalotte is alive and well — possibly ready to buy his wife another pearl necklace . . . Now *you,* Monsieur Arnold, are the fourth victim of this devil's pigeon trick."

Arnold sucked in a long, quick breath. "Pah !" he cried, his cheeks coloring and his eyes afire. "Do you mean to say there is no way of stopping this killer ?"

"We can't arrest him until we know who he is," quietly said Fleriot in that dry, cracking tone of his.

"What about the pigeons ?" the American exclaimed. "Homing pigeons fly straight home ! They ought to lead you to the man !"

And now Fleriot smiled — a curious smile. His long fingers began to rattle on the edge of the table.

"Monsieur Arnold," he said, "if you will instruct the Prefecture in the art of following a homing pigeon in its entire flight, I will personally propose you to the Legion of Honor."

Arnold snorted. "I know you can't follow it across a city — across roofs and all that," he admitted. "But what about taking it out into farm country and freeing it there ? What about following it in — in an aeroplane ?"

Fleriot sent a glance which seemed almost amused toward Barron Ixell. But Ixell still bent over the cage, absorbed in studying its structure; occasionally he of-

fered a low-toned comment to the massive Detective Deche at his side, eliciting comprehending nods.

The Prefecture man looked back at Arnold and at the pale, gaunt Monsieur Lamacor, both of whom appeared vibrantly excited.

"Aeroplanes ?" he repeated. "We have tried them unsuccessfully, Monsieur Arnold. The first pigeon — the one sent to Pierre Coli — we took to Le Bourget. When we released it, an army plane attempted to follow it. But the bird was frightened by the roar of the motor. It went down among trees — and was lost. We never saw it again."

Arnold stared in wonder, even swallowed.

"The second time we had a pigeon," resumed Fleriot, "and this was the bird sent to Walter Kant, an army plane at Le Bourget took it up to a height of eight thousand feet. There it was released, with a cord five hundred feet long tied from its leg to the plane. The bird, in a panic because of the motor's nearness and roaring, flew down to a lower level. Trying to escape, it flew about in crazy circles. The aviator was constrained to do circus tricks in order to see the pigeon at all. Finally, the propeller severed the cord. The bird streaked away for a patch of woods. We never saw it afterwards. The aviator, having dropped low, almost lost his life in that effort. His plane avoided tree-tops by inches."

Somewhat dazedly, Rodney Arnold sank to a chair, sent his fingers through his blond hair. He looked at the caged pigeon as an unarmed man in the jungle

might look at a poisonous snake. That bird had arrived to promise him death — unless he were willing to purchase life with the lavallière he had bought from Monsieur Lamacor.

In queer helplessness, he stared at the oval countenance of Barron Ixell, at his lively, questing eyes, at his smooth brown hair. He had heard more than once of this comparatively young criminal expert; he wished Ixell would rise from that cage for a moment and speak — advise.

Ixell did straighten, suddenly. He looked across the table, over the pigeon's cage, at Detective Fleriot.

"You are quite right," he said. "It is almost impossible to follow a homing pigeon for any great distance — unless we do it at sea or over a desert. If the bird has to cross forests, an aeroplane is almost useless. And that is why this scheme is so devilishly shrewd. There's scarcely a way of tracing the flight of the bird — of learning its destination. Unless, of course ——"

He paused. Quickly Fleriot asked, "Unless what ?"

"Why ——" Thoughtfully Ixell regarded the table. "Unless we follow men, and not pigeons."

"Eh ?"

Ixell began once more to frown. When he spoke, it was as if he were addressing himself more than anyone else.

"A curious circumstance about 'Monsieur Satan's' activities is that they all concern themselves with jewellry," he said slowly. "This man knows, ostensibly, when important chances present themselves. And

he takes them quickly." He returned to Rodney Arnold. "Tell me," he queried, "who knew you bought that lavallière —— ?"

The young American elevated his brows.

"Why — quite a few people — " he faltered. "Quite a few, I suppose. I mean — well, I'm going to be married when I return to the States, and I bought the lavallière as a wedding gift for my fiancée. I've many friends here in Paris, and I fancy I told quite a few of them. In fact, I *showed* the lavallière to one or two —— "

"Where is it now ?" asked Ixell.

"In the hotel safe."

So abruptly that it actually startled the man, Barron Ixell turned toward Monsieur Lamacor, the jeweller.

"Did anyone in your store know of the purchase, besides yourself ?"

Monsieur Lamacor's bony fingers rose to rub about his long chin. He scowled uneasily. He was, at least in outward personality, an extraordinary man. Tall, lean, gaunt to the verge of emaciation, he preserved an air of dignity which rendered his frock coat entirely appropriate. In the buttonhole of his lapel lay the tiny red ribbon of the *Légion d'Honneur* — a distinction he enjoyed in common with Detective Fleriot.

His hair was long and as lustrously black as raven plumes. And if his eyes were buried deep in their dark caverns, they were, nevertheless, brilliant and expressive. He talked very slowly, very deliberately.

"My clerks knew of the purchase," he said in a heavy

voice. "I have five clerks. Moreover, my bookkeeper knew of it."

He stopped; but his pause was a period of hesitation, as if he had something else — something unsolicited — to say. For a second those smouldering eyes of his roved about the room uncertainly. Then he stared at Fleriot and at Ixell.

"And — there was someone else," he added softly.

Detective Fleriot almost jumped as he snapped, "Who ? What do you mean ?"

"A man who called himself Doctor Golez."

In the momentary stillness that followed the mention of the new name, Detective Fleriot darted a swift glance at Ixell. The American's features offered no change of expression. He continued to eye Monsieur Lamacor narrowly, steadily.

"Who," finally asked Fleriot, "is Doctor Golez ?"

The jeweller cleared his throat very nervously. He looked at the insurance company's huge representative as if he were mutely requesting Detective Deche's support. Then, still stroking his chin, he resumed in that heavy, puzzled voice:

"You know, m'sieu', that since this 'Satan' has been terrorizing jewellers and their clients, our association has been cautious — especially cautious."

Fleriot brusquely nodded.

"We realized," continued Monsieur Lamacor, "that whoever was the perpetrator of these crimes, he knew something about the various jewels of exceptional value in Paris. And so we began, some weeks ago, to watch

the people who entered our stores; to keep notes, after a fashion. Now——" And he paused and cleared his throat. "On the day I sold Mr. Arnold the lavallière — yesterday — a man entered my shop and asked to see a pearl necklace I had displayed in the window. He examined it, priced it, but did not buy. He told me that he had just purchased a very similar necklace elsewhere and that he had simply wished to compare quality and prices. Then he departed — all this happening, messieurs, while Mr. Arnold himself was in my store talking of his lavallière. Detective Deche of the insurance company was also there, and he can corroborate the rest of the story of Doctor Golez."

In increasingly tense interest, Fleriot urged, "Go on, please!"

Monsieur Lamacor nodded. "I took the man's name and address. I do so with all customers or prospective buyers, in order to send them my occasional announcements. And I did not think of him again until I learned today, from several other jewellers in our association, that Doctor Golez had been in many stores on the Rue de la Paix!"

"Sapristi!" whispered Fleriot, his eyes round.

"Yes. He asked to see things at Carot's, at Benoit's, and at Cartier's."

"So——" muttered Detective Fleriot, while Barron Ixell merely looked on keenly. "Can you describe the man? Where is he?"

"His address is the Hotel Cambrai," said Monsieur

Lamacor. "As for his description, I leave that to Detective Deche. He is more experienced in such matters."

The insurance company's man, abruptly become the cynosure of curious stares, pondered reflectively.

He was unquestionably the tallest and heaviest man in the room, and his great figure dominated the group which watched him now. Behind shell-rimmed glasses, his grey eyes were intelligent and serious. His thin hair was reddish, lending his massive countenance an Irish rather than a French look. He thrust his thumbs into the vest pockets of his somewhat baggy blue suit.

"His description ?" he mumbled uncertainly. "I really didn't take much notice of him at the time. From the little I recall, however, Doctor Golez was a slender man, quite tall, who suggested a great deal of muscle under his tropical clothes. He wore a pince-nez, I think, and a Panama hat. More, I cannot definitely say. I imagine he was Spanish or Portuguese. The name sounds that way."

"Splendid !" declared Fleriot, glancing at Barron Ixell with renewed enthusiasm. "Doctor Golez — at the Hotel Cambrai !"

"There is really nothing wrong in a Spaniard's inspecting jewels at various shops," Ixell observed. "Of course, it won't do any harm to investigate him — "

"At once !" promised Detective Fleriot.

But Barron Ixell, ostensibly, was not wholly ready to depart. He stood before Rodney Arnold and asked.

"And what are *you* going to do about it all ?"

A second only Arnold considered. Then he jumped to his feet and, his cheeks crimson, wagged an angry finger at the cage.

"You can take that bird to the Prefecture!" he ejaculated. "I'm sailing for the States tomorrow, and I'll be hanged if I make any concessions to this murdering 'Satan !' "

Ixell shook the man's hand as he lifted his own hat and cane from a chair.

"Very good," he commended. "I'm certain the police will give you adequate protection until you're on board ship at Cherbourg. And I shall be around myself in the morning, Mr. Arnold, to see you as far as the Gare St. Lazare. I suppose Fleriot, too, will want to escort you to the station."

Arnold managed a faint grin.

"A bodyguard, eh ?" he said. "Well, I hope you gentlemen won't witness any killings. I'm too anxious to get home — and married."

And then, very quietly, the deep voice of Monsieur Lamacor intervened.

"If I were you, Monsieur Arnold," said the jeweller, "I shouldn't step out of my room — tonight."

CHAPTER III

A CAR GOES BY

IN the lobby of the Hotel Dulac, some minutes later, Barron Ixell and Fleriot, taking the homing pigeon with them, bid good-night to both Monsieur Lamacor, the strangely cadaverous jeweller, and Detective Deche.

Upstairs the hotel detective had remained with Rodney Arnold, awaiting the arrival of two *agents de police* dispatched by the Prefecture to serve as additional bodyguards for the American.

As they were shaking hands, the huge Detective Deche told Ixell: "The trouble is that newspaper publicity is making this 'Monsieur Satan' so weird and elusive a figure that, in public fancy, he has become almost romantic; and it has pictured him as being so ruthless that he has become a horrible hero to other lesser criminals."

"Regrettable," commented Ixell. "It's true, however, that the successful exploits of any great criminal, when flaunted in all the papers, do stimulate a sort of crime wave among others. One man's success is another man's lure — whether in decent or criminal pursuits."

Monsieur Lamacor anxiously interrupted, speaking to Fleriot.

"You will, of course, investigate this Doctor Golez ?"

"Tonight," said the detective.

And he proceeded to that task as soon as Deche and Monsieur Lamacor had departed. Leaving Ixell for a few minutes with the cage, he went to the Dulac's telephone booths. The manager of the Hotel Cambrai, he hoped, would be able to impart some information about the odd Doctor Golez.

Obviously, Detective Fleriot learned something disturbing, for when he returned to Barron Ixell, his expression was at once hard and perplexed.

"Doctor Golez is registered there," he said. "He came a week ago. But since then *he has never occupied his room !"*

Ixell, lighting a fresh panatela, arched his brows.

"Perhaps significant, *n'est-ce pas ?"* muttered Fleriot. "The manager told me that, once a day, Doctor Golez either telephones or comes personally to inquire about mail. Today — this afternoon — he telephoned. But no one at the hotel knows where he may be found. I'll station a man at the Cambrai, of course — "

Fleriot stopped as two young men, both exhibiting reporters' cards, accosted him. Having, through some mysterious and speedy channel, discovered the scent of the new development in the "Monsieur Satan" affair, they had already produced notebooks and pencils and were insistent upon obtaining a few words from both Fleriot and Ixell.

But the white-haired detective was in no humor to

grant interviews. "Get the story from the hotel," he advised, and urged his American colleague to accompany him out of the lobby.

"Will you come with me to the Prefecture, or shall I drop you at your hotel ?" he inquired. Ixell looked out of the Department car. It had begun to rain, and the chauffeur had been constrained to put up the automobile's top.

"Oh," he said idly, "better let me off at the hotel. I'm tired, really. Besides, I'd like to think a while, if you don't mind, Fleriot. And your Prefecture is the most depressing spot in Paris."

All night, the monotonous rain filled Paris with its dreary, melancholy patter. The wind had subsided; now the trees in the Champs Elysées drooped and sagged under the weight of the interminable downpour. The lights of the great avenue stabbed golden swords into the glittering pavements; sidewalks became shimmering stretches of black glass over which solitary shadows occasionally hurried.

If Barron Ixell's thoughts were burdened with the mystery of "Monsieur Satan" and his carrier pigeons, he did not permit the circumstance to affect his sleep. He rested soundly and was glad to see, when he looked out of his window on awakening, that the rain had finally ceased.

It was a grey morning which came to witness the departure of Rodney Arnold for Cherbourg, and subsequently, for the United States. The boat train was to leave the Gare St. Lazare at half-past ten. One hour before that scheduled departure, an automobile sent by

the Prefecture of Police waited outside the Hotel Dulac.

In Arnold's chamber, the brisk Detective Fleriot was explaining to the American:

"*Agents de police* of Paris cannot, naturally, accompany you all the way to Cherbourg. But I have secured two *gendarmes* — I believe you call them military police, no ? — who will ride with you to the boat. They are in the Department car downstairs. Of course, Monsieur Ixell and I will go with you as far as the Gare St. Lazare."

"I hope I get *that* far," said Arnold, grinning wryly. "Where is Mr. Ixell ?"

"He'll be here at a quarter of ten. We might go down to meet him in the lobby."

Barron Ixell, smiling, alert, and decidedly attractive in a well-tailored brown suit, encountered them as they emerged from the lift. "You have a strong guard outside, I've noticed," he said.

"It's good to be alive to appreciate it," replied Arnold. "I've been up all night listening for footsteps, ghosts, devils, the flutter of pigeon wings, and whatnot." The blond American endeavored, perhaps too obviously, to be cheerful as he crossed the lobby and climbed into the Department automobile. Most of his luggage had been sent ahead; two bags, however, lay under his feet. "Do I look as haggard as I feel ?" He chatted lightly, humorously, yet he was visibly enduring a wracking nervous strain. His eyes sent quick, uneasy glances in all directions, even while he jested.

Detective Fleriot, as energetic as ever, pointed to the middle of the commodious back seat.

"You will sit there, Monsieur Arnold," he directed, "between Monsieur Ixell and myself. One of the *gendarmes* will sit in front of us, back here; the other will remain beside the chauffeur. So !"

In this position Rodney Arnold's vigorous body was entirely shielded from all sides as the large automobile rolled away from the Hotel Dulac. Possibly to still his own throbbings, as much as to cheer his guards, he conversed merrily as they rode down past the Etoile with its magnificent Arc, now stupendous in daylight.

A great deal of traffic surrounded them on the Avenue des Champs Elysées. It seemed to cling to them as they turned into a side street to seek the shortest route to the Gare St. Lazare. Because there remained almost an hour before the departure of the train, the chauffeur did not attempt to race. He allowed several other cars to whir past him.

They were more than half way to their destination when their automobile was almost lifted by an explosion directly under it !

Rodney Arnold leapt as if he had actually been shot; his face, in an instant, became ghastly pallid. Trembling a little in spite of his recent buoyancy, he gasped, "Lord ! Wh-what was that ?" The crashing report left him haggard with sudden, helpless fear.

Promptly, the chauffeur stopped the automobile at the curb. In profound disgust, he rasped that one of the back tires had exploded. When he stepped out of the car, he was grumbling something about this being the fourth blowout in two weeks; why didn't the city government buy better tires ?

"The rear left one," he announced after an instant of inspection. Then an astonished oath burst from the stooping chauffeur. He seemed to rebound from the wheel as if something had struck him a sudden blow.

"What's the matter ?" called Detective Fleriot.

"It's no blowout, m'sieu' !" exclaimed the man, his face astounded and pale. His voice dropped to an awed whisper. "Somebody put a bullet into the tire ! That's what's happened."

"Nom d'un nom !" snapped the tempestuous Fleriot. "No !"

"But yes, m'sieu' ! See for yourself. There's a distinct bullet hole in the rim ! What else can it be ?"

Impetuously, Detective Fleriot flung open the left door of the car and sprang down into the gutter. Even as he leapt, Barron Ixell cried, *"Come here ! Get back, Fleriot !"*

But it was too late. The lithe Prefecture man was bending to squint at the wheel. And as he bent, a large sedan, grey and powerful, screamed past on the other side of the street. Its window was open; and from that window a hand suddenly jutted — a hand gripping an automatic revolver.

There was the sharp crack of a shot.

Rodney Arnold half rose. His hand darted up to clutch madly at his shoulder. A second he reeled, as Barron Ixell seized him. Then he limply sank back across Ixell's knees; and before he completely shut his eyes, he groaned:

"That devil got me all right !"

CHAPTER IV

IXELL'S IDEA

AN hour later, Monsieur Jacques Etien de Saintville, the grey-bearded and venerable Prefect of the Paris Department of Police, frowned across his mahogany desk at Detective Armand Fleriot.

Fleriot, ace of the Prefecture, concededly the shrewdest criminal investigator under Monsieur de Saintville, had made a mistake. He knew it. He acknowledged it. He was thoroughly exasperated by it. In consequence, he was striding back and forth across the Prefect's scarlet carpet, and his right hand continuously beat into his left palm.

"It was entirely my fault," he declared, flavoring his words with occasional expletives which furnished in vehemence what they lacked in dignity. "Ixell was seated on his right, I on his left. When I jumped out so impulsively, I uncovered Rodney Arnold."

The Prefect's eyes patiently followed the agitated stride of Fleriot.

"I don't understand yet exactly how it was done," asserted Monsieur de Saintville in tones like the rumble of a tympanum. "If you would be good enough to

stand still a moment, Fleriot, and to talk more coherently, perhaps you would make it easier for me."

Fleriot did stop, his small eyes flaming.

"It was so devilishly simple — as devilish as everything else that killer does !" he exclaimed. "Picture it — visualize it — Monsieur le Prefect: There is Rodney Arnold seated between Barron Ixell and myself. He is completely shielded from possible shots."

The detective was illustrating his account with characteristically French gestures which, in truth, aided much in vividly portraying the scene.

"This 'Monsieur Satan,' " he continued, "following in another car, a sedan, realizes he cannot hope to hit Arnold. So he tells his chauffeur to pass us quickly. As his car sweeps by, he leans out and puts a bullet into our back tire. Naturally we stop. In the meanwhile, 'Monsieur Satan's' sedan turns around at the next corner and comes back toward us. And I — impossible fool that I am — have jumped out to look at our wheel. I uncover Arnold. Ixell sees it at once and shouts to me. But it is too late. As 'Monsieur Satan's' car races by again, he has a clear, unprotected target — and he is a good shot. He shoots Arnold. *Sacré ciel,* I feel like resigning when I think of how stupidly I stepped into the trap !"

Deep within his grey beard, Monsieur de Saintville clucked thoughtfully, his fingers drumming a pencil on the desk.

"No one saw the man who fired the shot ?" he queried finally. "You are sure of that, Fleriot ?"

"Positive ! He must have been leaning far back in

his sedan. He showed only his hand and his eye as he fired, and jerked both back too quickly for anyone to see."

"And his chauffeur —— ?"

"Barron Ixell did catch a glimpse of the chauffeur," Fleriot said. "But the sedan passed so swiftly that it was only an instant's look he had. Besides, Rodney Arnold, rising and swaying, obstructed Ixell's view considerably."

"H'm," muttered Monsieur de Saintville. His frown had become a profound scowl. The tapping of the pencil continued as the only sound in the spacious office until the Prefect demanded, "But the sedan ! Surely somebody can identify it — somebody saw its number —— "

In utter chagrin Detective Fleriot grimaced and threw up his hands.

"Bah !" he answered. "One credits 'Monsieur Satan' with very little ingenuity to think that, Monsieur le Prefect. Do you imagine he used a car easily identifiable ? We know it was a grey Renault sedan — and there are hundreds — possibly more than a thousand — precisely like it in Paris !"

"But its number —— "

"Ah, yes, its number. Ixell did try to get it; so did both *gendarmes;* so did our chauffeur; and so did I. So, I am certain, did several people in the street."

"Eh bien ?"

"Sapristi ! That clever devil had loosened one of the bolts which held his license plate, so that the thing swung back and forth, vertically, on only the other

screw. Thus he could not be stopped by the police for having no plate; and at the same time, he made it difficult — almost impossible — for anyone to read his number. His car rushed to the next corner and swung into it. His enormous speed made that plate swing crazily. None of us had time to distinguish the number."

Monsieur de Saintville sighed — a deep, audible sigh that quivered through his great grey beard. His eyes wandered obliquely toward the newspapers piled on the edge of his mahogany desk. They devoted an inordinate amount of space to "Monsieur Satan," those papers. Also, their tone was becoming unpleasantly, irritably caustic. One of them had brazenly demanded whether there were really more brains in one murderous figure than in the entire Prefecture.

This morning, in particular, the comments were stinging. For the news of the caged homing pigeon, delivered to Rodney Arnold at the Hotel Dulac, had been shouted lustily from the centre of every front page. With uneasy prevision, Monsieur de Saintville contemplated the probable items in the afternoon papers — when it would be announced that, again, the untraceable "Monsieur Satan" had enacted one of his threats; that again the Prefecture knew not in which direction to turn; that again the authorities had been out-manœuvered in the very face of all their precautions.

Monsieur de Saintville thoughtfully stroked his beard. He had been in office long enough to disdain, to a certain extent, the sardonic, and sometimes hysteri-

cal, censure of the press; but in this case, he writhed inwardly. If a person committed a murder and the Prefecture consumed months in trailing the killer — *eh, bien,* one could endure the impatience of the public. One could tell the reporters something vague about progress being satisfactory. But — when a notorious figure committed *four* crimes in two months — when he continuously snapped his fingers under the very nose of the police, one could not reasonably speak of progress.

The Prefect stared up gravely. "Where is Monsieur Ixell ?" he asked.

"He remained at the hospital with Rodney Arnold, but I expect him here."

"H'm," grunted Monsieur de Saintville. "What do you intend to do now, Fleriot ?"

"I intend to listen to Ixell before I do anything."

"You think he has — suggestions ?"

"I know he has ideas. That man always has."

Barron Ixell arrived within fifteen minutes. Though he appeared as trim and alert as ever, as he accepted the proffered chair beside the Prefect's desk, his countenance bore a solemn and somewhat misgiving expression.

"Mr. Arnold," he said, "is quite badly hurt." His lips formed a tight straight line. "The bullet struck him just below the left shoulder. The doctors say he has a chance — a good chance — but they say it in a very queer tone."

"We have cabled his people," murmured Monsieur de Saintville. And then, narrowly eyeing his pencil,

he muttered to himself, "I wonder how many more families we will have to notify about the acts of 'Monsieur Satan'——"

For a moment, there was stillness — strange stillness. The Prefect looked up at the American.

"Monsieur Ixell," he said candidly, "we are confronting a sort of wall through which we can find no door. So far as we can perceive, there is, at present, no means of putting our hand on this 'Monsieur Satan.' There appears to be no way of establishing his identity. The car from which Arnold was shot cannot be traced. Nobody saw the man who fired. Few can give a satisfactory description of its chauffeur. We have a pigeon which might lead us to the criminal, but we cannot follow it; we cannot follow it far enough, at any rate. Monsieur Ixell, you are viewing this case as — shall we say a student of criminal methods. From all you have seen, what means of procedure would *you* advise ?"

Ixell drew a long breath. His eyes darted from the bearded face of the Prefect to the strained features of Detective Fleriot.

Then, very quietly, he said:

"When you cannot go to a criminal, it is always best to make the criminal come to you."

At this, Monsieur de Saintville stared in some surprise. He might have deemed the words empty and sententious, had he not discerned a deeper meaning behind them. Moreover, he saw Fleriot had narrowed his eyes shrewdly, attentively. And Fleriot knew Barron Ixell; knew his unusual and unique methods;

knew that he habitually had something substantial to offer in support of his utterances.

"Your plan ?" urged the Prefect immediately, leaning forward.

"I'm going to suggest," said Ixell in an extremely even and low tone, "that you give the newspapers a false report."

Monsieur de Saintville straightened, gaped a little. After a glance at Fleriot, he protested, "But that is scarcely our custom, Monsieur Ixell !"

"Naturally. But I believe your 'Monsieur Satan' is worth a break in precedent."

"Just how do you mean ?"

Ixell spoke with firm confidence now. "I suggest," he said, "that this story be given to those news-hungry reporters outside. Tell them that a certain student, Gaston Abernathil will be his name, was walking on the street where Rodney Arnold was shot at the time of the attack. This Gaston Abernathil has presented himself to the Prefecture with the tidings that *he saw the face of the man in the sedan !* He saw it as the car swept by, and he is always at the Prefecture's disposal — to identify that face !"

Monsieur de Saintville seemed rather bewildered.

"The papers will also be informed," proceeded Ixell, "that Gaston Abernathil lives at the small Hotel du Quartier Ancien, over on the Left Bank. He is studying at the Sorbonne — a young man who was moved by public spirit to volunteer his information to the Prefect of Police."

Though Monsieur de Saintville palpably did not

comprehend the full purport of the suggestion, at the first consideration, he did see complete and brilliant understanding in the face of Fleriot. The detective, his eyes shining enthusiastically, snapped his fingers in a gesture of delight.

"Sapristi!" he whispered. "It is perfect!"

"How?" demanded the Prefect, doubtless sensing himself ridiculously obtuse at the moment.

It was, strangely, Fleriot who rapidly explained the motive behind Barron Ixell's idea.

"How?" he exclaimed. "Consider what we know of the character of 'Monsieur Satan.' When he reads that there is one person in Paris who can identify him — *sacré ciel,* it is a hundred to one that he will try to exterminate that person!"

And now Monsieur de Saintville, suddenly understanding, leaned far back in his chair and stared at Ixell.

"You mean — you want to lure 'Monsieur Satan' to the room of this Gaston Abernathil?"

Ixell smiled. "Exactly," he confessed. "Either 'Monsieur Satan,' himself, or someone he may send to handle poor Abernathil."

The Prefect pondered a few seconds, then he muttered:

"The idea is not bad — certainly worth attempting. But — where is the Hotel du Quartier Ancien? What about this fictitious Gaston Abernathil?"

Barron Ixell's smile did not alter as he extracted a small card from his pocket and tendered it across the mahogany desk to Monsieur de Saintville.

"There," he said, "is the address of the hotel. On my way here from the hospital, I made all necessary arrangements with its good proprietor. And," he added, "as for Gaston Abernathil, here I am !"

CHAPTER V

THE KNIFE-THROWER

THE Hotel du Quartier Ancien reared its four dismal stories in a narrow, unsavory street of the Latin Quarter — the Rue Pelon. It was a very meagre and unpretentious hostelry, squeezed between two buildings of similar proportions. Because of its unfortunate lack of modern conveniences, it was compelled to seek its clientele among the more impecunious students and artists who roamed the vanished bohemia of Paris.

In its heyday, the Hotel du Quartier Ancien had housed some people of eventual eminence. One of them, a poet who achieved distinction, wrote an ode to the place. He called it "a thin spinster, desperately elbowing a place for herself on the Rue Pelon" — but not in his ode. There he spoke of it, with little modesty, as "cradle of inspiration."

Monsieur Eck, its proprietor, knew a great deal about human nature — at least, so he asserted after his fourth glass of Burgundy. He had drunk a little — not too much — that day, so that when Gaston Abernathil arrived in the evening, Monsieur Eck was in a communicative and genial mood, prepared to discuss the various ailments of the human race most amicably.

Unhappily, Gaston Abernathil evinced a brisker humor. He was, very clearly, a student. He wore the customary broad-brimmed black felt hat. A rather shabby suit, a pair of shell-rimmed spectacles, and a tiny dark moustache completed his startling appearance.

Monsieur Eck declared, after Abernathil had presented himself, that the disguise was altogether incomprehensible to him.

"It isn't very skillful," Ixell said, "but in the dark it is sufficient to impress anyone who may be watching the hotel. My room is ready ?"

"On the top floor as you requested, m'sieu'," answered Monsieur Eck, apparently eager to help.

"Has anyone asked for Gaston Abernathil ?"

The proprietor grinned. "Anyone, m'sieu' ? *Ma foi,* since the afternoon papers printed that story of the student who had witnessed the work of 'Monsieur Satan,' I have had twenty reporters !"

"You told them what —— ?"

"As you directed: Your room was on the top floor left and hadn't been occupied all day. I didn't know when you would return."

"Good," commended Ixell. He reflected that some of those reporters had doubtless used the title as a pretext for gaining information from Monsieur Eck; that some of them might have been commissioned by "Monsieur Satan" —— Aloud he said, "If any other reporters arrive, tell them I will see no one. Say I have returned, but I have police orders to give no newspapermen, or anyone, for that matter, an interview. I

can rely on you to remain awake and ready all night, without fail ?"

"Perfectly," promised Monsieur Eck, thinking of the hundred francs he had been paid for a five-franc room.

Barron Ixell mounted the four flights to the humble chamber of Gaston Abernathil.

So small and miserable was the room in its lonely corner that few guests of the Hotel du Quartier Ancien consented to occupy it — even when concessions were offered. Its ceiling was low; its gas jet was bent. The cot which filled the side opposite the window creaked and screamed an agonized protest when Ixell sat upon it. There was a rickety table that rocked on split legs; a chair, whose straw seat had long since been torn, huddled in sad solitude in a barren corner.

But Ixell was thoroughly satisfied with the place. Was it not immediately under the roof ? Did not that fact facilitate the visits of callers who might seek an unconventional means of entrance ?

From eight until eleven he sat on the cot and read, by the light of the crooked gas jet, the various newspapers he had brought to this vigil. He smoked several panatelas and rendered himself as comfortable as the circumstances permitted.

At eleven, however, he extinguished the light. Then he did a strange thing.

A great, bulging featherbed had been brought to the room by Monsieur Eck — in conformity with Ixell's requests. This was now rolled into a bundle and thrust under the covers of the cot.

When the task was completed, Barron Ixell sat on the floor beside the window.

He gazed up at a star-filled sky, through which a crescent moon floated. Its dim light played upon the pane, sent a luminous shower over Ixell's upturned countenance, glimmered in his smooth brown hair. He had rid himself of the spectacles and moustache; those had been intended only for any possible watchers of the hotel.

In his pocket lay a squat, efficient automatic revolver. He looked behind him. Fortunately the moonlight did not pour into the room as far as the cot. One might very easily conceive a man to be sleeping there; the rolled featherbed played its part superbly. And the manner in which the cover had been drawn up would conceal any sleeper's head.

Ixell was ready — either for "Monsieur Satan," himself, or for his emissary.

That the ruse would succeed, however, was far from a certainty, and this he realized. But it was indubitably worth the effort of a trial.

He sat very still, waiting. Somewhere a church bell — distant and faint — tinkled twelve times. Ixell, still on the floor, propped his back to the wall and gazed at the melon-slice of moon as it travelled across the scintillant night skies.

There were no policemen in the Hotel du Quartier Ancien, for Ixell had said to Detective Fleriot: "We cannot risk spoiling things by frightening 'Satan' away. If he knows — if he even suspects — anyone of the

force has entered the hotel, he will know there is a trap. For the same reason," he had added, "I don't believe it wise to keep a police guard about the hotel itself. I am certain it will be watched — by 'Satan' or one of his people. If they should be aware of unusual figures slouching about the hotel street——"

"You are within five minutes' automobile run from the Prefecture itself," Fleriot had replied. "In case of emergency — that is, if you actually do trap anyone — Monsieur Eck can telephone."

"That is the arrangement I have made with him," said Ixell.

Now he sat waiting. The church bell presently tinkled one — and two. Out of Paris rose a subdued hum — a hum that was like a hush. It was a tense stillness through which occasionally quacked a taxicab horn or the rumble of a truck crossing a bridge toward the market at Les Halles. Or a faint church bell——

Paris never sleeps; at night, it merely pauses to pant a while so that it may resume its raucous turbulence at dawn. And Ixell listened. From the nearby Seine, a woman's abandoned laughter floated up to him. The hurrying footsteps of a belated pedestrian echoed hollowly on the cobblestones below. Still he listened. Again, the woman's laughter came, this time fainter and farther down the river.

Then, of a sudden, he stiffened. His eyes narrowed. Overhead, on the roof, he heard soft, crunching treads!

Very quietly Barron Ixell rose and pressed himself

into the corner beside the window. His eyes were gleaming oddly as he drew the automatic from his pocket. Was the trick really going to succeed ?

As he waited he scarcely breathed. The crunching sounds continued, stopped. More than a minute of hushed, strained inactivity dragged by — a minute that was an age.

Then something fell to dangle before the window. It writhed like a serpent before it finally hung straight; a stout rope. . .

A queer, expectant smile lurked about Ixell's lips. There were more treads on the roof. They ended. And presently the open window framed a pair of slim, long legs sliding down the rope !

The feet sought the window ledge with silent, easy skill. A moment later a figure crouched there — the figure of a slender, stooping man.

One of its hands clung to the rope. The other drew a long, thin knife from a pocket, poised it a second — and hurled it expertly at the bundle on the cot !

Had there been time to marvel, Ixell might have seen that the blade neatly pierced its target. But he was not looking at that. He had been watching the knife-thrower's hand. It entered the room as it hurled its weapon.

At that instant Ixell's fingers swooped forward to seize the thin wrist. He yanked it inward. He heard a peculiar gasp.

In a second the slim, dumbfounded figure squirmed on the floor. But he was up immediately — fighting, writhing, squirming.

He was active; agile as an eel, that wriggling little armful. Moreover, his contorting tactics were succeeding. Ixell's automatic was struck from his grasp. In such an exigency there was but one thing to do, and the American did not hesitate. He wrenched his right hand free, clenched it, and smashed his fist into the little fellow's face. The man merely grunted — then collapsed and lay motionless.

Panting, Ixell retrieved his weapon. By the time he lifted a match to the gas jet, the knife-thrower had regained consciousness and was blinking up with bulging eyes.

That yellow flood of light — sickly light — disclosed a wretched sight.

The man on the floor was as miserable a ragamuffin as ever Barron Ixell had encountered. His wrinkled, patched suit seemed to be someone else's cast-off; instead of a shirt, he wore a dirty and torn sweater. A battered cap, which even his flounderings had been unable to dislodge, covered long, unkempt hair that crawled down about his temples. But the most repulsive thing about his utterly pitiful personality was a hideous scar that crossed his right cheek from nose to ear.

That discolored cleft held Ixell's frowning gaze for a while. Finally he ordered. "Get up! Sit on that chair!"

It was almost like issuing commands to a well trained but ugly dog. The man obeyed easily, his lean figure shrinking away from the automatic. When he sat on the torn straw of the chair, he was visibly shaking.

And because his countenance held no color, its scar assumed a horribly purplish hue.

"Your name ?" Ixell demanded. The prisoner offered no answer. And so the question was repeated more peremptorily. Still no reply came. "Do you want to be forced to talk ?" Ixell threatened.

Then the knife-thrower did an unanticipated thing. He uttered queer, gurgling sounds, pointed to his throat, and shook his head helplessly.

Barron Ixell stared. "Mute ?" He could not suppress the incredulous note in his surprised voice.

His captive nodded. Ixell sensed the suspicion that the man was lying. It would be an efficacious way of avoiding immediate replies. He frowned, considered. At the Prefecture, he knew, the authorities were awaiting his telephone call. Beyond doubt the wisest course was to place this squirming fellow in the hands of the police; it would be easier — and safer — to elicit information from him after he had been arrested.

That this slender ragamuffin was the much sought "Monsieur Satan," Ixell could not believe. Probably a hireling, he decided. But through him, one might go far ——

"Get up !" he said. When the frightened mute had obeyed, Ixell moved behind him and swiftly searched his pockets. The man carried no other weapons.

"We're going downstairs," went on the American. "Move slowly. Don't try to turn unless I tell you to do so."

Outside, the corridor was dimly lit by scattered gas

jets, one on each landing. They proceeded down the creaking stairs very slowly, the automatic pressed against the knife-thrower's back. Monsieur Eck, Ixell knew, would be waiting at the bottom of the steps — if he had heeded all instructions.

The prisoner evinced no inclination to attempt escape. Clearly, he was relieved to discover that no physical harm was intended him, and he submitted readily to the pressure of the gun. In front of Barron Ixell, he meekly descended those groaning stairs, not once so much as turning his head.

They reached the bottom. Monsieur Eck was not there.

But from a small, black office which opened from the corridor like a cavern, his breaths issued very audibly. Had the man gone to sleep ?

Ixell snapped his name. There was no response. He began to utter it a second time, more loudly. And at that moment, as he parted his lips to speak, something frightfully swift and hard crashed against the side of his head !

He saw the floor heave up convulsively, like a surging, angry sea. He felt the strength ooze out of his collapsing legs. He tried desperately to cry out, to pull the trigger of his automatic. Blindly he clutched at the wall.

Then a flood of absolute blackness swept over his senses, and he sank in a limp, motionless huddle at the bottom of the stairs.

CHAPTER VI

LOUIS THE SILENT

WHEN Ixell regained consciousness, he was aware, at first, only of a punitive pounding in his head. For a while he lay still; voices were buzzing in his ears. He struggled to recognize them, to understand them. He forced his eyes open. And he saw, in a blaze of yellow light, the taut, agitated countenance of Detective Fleriot.

Other men were grouped about him, too — men in the uniform of police. He gazed at them dully for several seconds before their presence impressed itself upon him.

Ixell lay on a bench in the office of Monsieur Eck, a wet bandage encircling his head. Sprawling in a huge chair, and haloed with a similar bandage, was Eck.

And though Ixell perceived all this, some five minutes passed before he could remember everything that had occurred and attempt conversation with Fleriot.

"Somebody — " he whispered at last — "hiding behind stairs — got me —— "

"Don't try to talk now," advised the detective. "Wait."

Presently, the pounding in Barron Ixell's head became a heavy, rhythmic throb, still extremely painful.

When he essayed to assume a sitting posture, nauseating dizziness swam into him. He fought against it, shut his eyes. With the aid of a policeman, however, he eventually managed to sit upright. Someone held a small glass of cognac to his mouth; he swallowed it. And out of the confusion the rueful voice of Monsieur Eck floated to him:

"I think, m'sieu', you got a worse smack than I, *pardieu!*"

Ixell stared at the stout man sprawling in the great chair; he looked up at the grim Fleriot.

"Have I been unconscious long?" he asked in a soft, unsteady tone.

"*We've* been here fifteen minutes," replied Fleriot. "You must have been out for some time before that, too."

Ixell brought a wan smile to his lips. "So passes — Gaston Abernathil — " he said. "A short — lively — career."

He listened attentively and without the smile, a little later, when Detective Fleriot, sitting beside him, explained what had occurred. The Prefecture man, speaking quickly and in evident concern for Ixell's condition, said:

"Monsieur Eck has told us his end of the story. At four o'clock — he heard a church bell distinctly — someone knocked at the outer door. He asked who was there, before opening. A man's voice answered, giving my name."

Ixell stared in astonishment that was modified by his nod.

"The man said he must see Gaston Abernathil at once — that he was wanted at the Prefecture. It sounded convincing to Monsieur Eck, though I fancy Monsieur Eck would have been less credulous had his breath held a fainter odor of wine. At any rate, Monsieur Eck opened the door to peer out. Something immediately struck him on the head, and he dropped as unconscious as you were yourself."

"I wasn't drunk !" objected the hotel proprietor indignantly.

"Possibly not," drily acceded Fleriot. "But we found two empty wine bottles in this office. But that is now beside the point. When Monsieur Eck awoke in his office, he discovered you at the bottom of the stairs, Monsieur Ixell. He had the good sense to telephone the Prefecture at once."

"So two men tried to get Abernathil," he murmured thoughtfully. "One through the door, the other over the roof —— "

"Two men ?" ejaculated Fleriot, gaping. "You mean there was another ?"

Barron Ixell strengthened himself with a long breath. As concisely as he could, he related his own experience with the knife-thrower, and when he had finished, Detective Fleriot slapped a resounding hand on his knee.

"Sapristi !" He looked up at one of the *agents de police.* "That scarred cheek — the mute man — the knife !"

"You know him?" Ixtell quickly queried.

"Know him ? *Sacré ciel.* I, myself, sent Louis

the Silent to prison twice! The whole Department knows him!"

"He's really a mute?"

"When he wants to be," retorted Fleriot. "Only then!"

Despite his bandaged, aching head, Barron Ixell suddenly — though rather shakily — rose. "You know where to find him?" he demanded.

"I can learn where he lives within two hours!" promised Detective Fleriot, also jumping up from the seat. "The whole Paris underworld knows Louis the Silent. He used to throw knives in some travelling show before he went to prison the first time. *Nom d'un nom,* the night was not a failure, Monsieur Ixell. If, through Louis the Silent, we can find a clue to 'Monsieur Satan' ——"

"Ah," said Ixell, "but I doubt that you'll find Louis the Silent — after this." With the assistance of an *agent's* arm, he was moving toward the door. "'Monsieur Satan,'" he murmured in almost a sigh, "will find ways of concealing Louis — he *must* find ways — now."

At the door of the office, Ixell, paused to regard the reclining proprietor of the Hotel du Quartier Ancien. With his bandage, the man resembled a turbaned, well-nourished Hindu. In his plump cheeks, the flush of wine still lingered.

"Monsieur Eck," he said, "I regret that you suffered through your willingness to aid the police." His voice was not yet strong, but it had regained some steadiness. "Nevertheless, you have only yourself to

blame for the blow you received. If I remember correctly, I very distinctly asked you — cautioned you — to open the door to no one this night. If you hadn't consumed so much wine ——"

"But, *je vous assure,*" insisted the distressed Monsieur Eck, "I was not drunk !"

"We won't dispute it. What I'd like to know is: did you see the man who struck you ?"

Monsieur Eck rolled his eyes and lifted his hands.

"As one sees an oncoming bolt of lightning !" he replied.

"Can't you describe him at all ?"

The hotel proprietor scratched his cheek in profound reflection. After a while he flabbily shrugged.

"I think," he said, "that he had a big face and — and a moustache. A brown moustache, maybe. Surely a dark one. More I did not see before the lightning struck."

Barron Ixell looked at Detective Fleriot.

"Odd," he commented. "The man who delivered the pigeon cage for Rodney Arnold; the man who drove 'Monsieur Satan's' sedan; and the man who hit Monsieur Eck — always that vague brown moustache ——"

The two investigators searchingly eyed each other. Then Ixell said, "Ah, come, Fleriot. You must hunt for Louis the Silent, and I — I must get rid of this confounded headache — all that remains of Gaston Abernathil, poor chap !"

CHAPTER VII

CODE

BY mid-afternoon of the ensuing day, Barron Ixell had retrieved much of his health and all of his strength. He stood before a mirror in his rooms at the hotel on the Champs Elysées and studied, with a somewhat wry expression, a very visible welt that graced the side of his head just above the right ear. His brown hair bristled about the swelling.

A morning of sound sleep, abetted by an invigorating cold bath, had vanquished the thumpings the wound had induced; still, however, he occasionally experienced a slight spell of dizziness.

In a neat grey suit, he appeared quite his normal self; and when, with a panatela between his lips, he finally sank into an easy chair to glance over a half dozen newspapers, he scarcely presented the aspect of one who had, ten hours previously, sustained a cruel, stunning blow — a blow that had left him comatose for perhaps thirty minutes.

Ixell sat beside a window, open so that a warm breeze might flow against him. His legs crossed, he scanned the accounts in the various papers. With that uncanny thoroughness of news gatherers, the entire

story of Gaston Abernathil — now in its true form — had somehow been amassed.

It required little delving to discover the source of the reporters' precise data.

Ostensibly, Monsieur Eck, proprietor of the venerable Hotel du Quartier Ancien, believed that there no longer existed any necessity for secrecy concerning the short-lived Abernathil; that the fictitious personage, having served as much purpose as possible, needed no longer to be suppressed under a pall of mystery. Possibly, also, Monsieur Eck had decided that his hostelry was entitled to a certain payment in publicity for the manner in which it had aided the Prefecture. Whatever the cause, Monsieur Eck had generously, volubly, dramatically, and vividly entertained the reporters, so that the story of the night's occurrences was offered to the public in fascinating detail.

"Monsieur Satan," Ixtell discovered, had usurped the choicest positions in almost all the afternoon papers. One editor, who seemed to cherish a chronic animosity against the Prefecture, sardonically pointed out that once more the police had permitted their noses to be tweaked by the energetic "Monsieur Satan."

In the lower corner of a page, Ixell read with satisfaction that Rodney Arnold's condition had improved. The paper reported:

> Physicians said that the wound is not as serious as originally supposed. Though deep, it promises to develop no great danger. The American, Mr. Rodney Arnold, may be able to sail for New York within a few weeks.

Ixell had telephoned to the hospital twice that day;

he was aware of even more than the papers imparted. And he felt content in the knowledge that "Monsieur Satan" had not added fatality to his devilish achievements in the case of Rodney Arnold.

Through the open window rushed the song that is Paris Awake. The whir of automobiles, gliding and glistening down the broad road to the Champs Elysées; the deep roar of buses; the rustling, laughing message of the wind to the trees; a cacophony of horns and sirens; and an interminable undertone to it all, that was like the growl of something unseen and unguessed.

Pondering, Barron Ixell stared out upon the vast avenue. His window overlooked a green sea — a sea of swaying foliage, in whose depths people moved, automobiles slipped. And over it all, his fancy construed the shadowy, destructive figure of "Monsieur Satan" — a fishhawk, hovering over the sea, awaiting a chance to swoop down upon another victim.

He was steeped in cogitations when, shortly before four o'clock, Detective Fleriot arrived.

The energetic, white-haired Prefecture ace threw his hat to a chair and promptly, with gusto that was more American than French, sprang to business. He sat opposite Ixell and bent forward, his eyes brilliant though narrow.

"You feel better, m'sieu' ?" he asked.

"Quite," Ixell assured him, smiling. "You look as if you've struck gold, Fleriot."

"Not gold; information — of a sort. We have lo-

cated the room of Louis the Silent. I thought it would take two hours. It took ten."

Ixell straightened in quick interest; the detective, he saw, was taking a wallet from an inner pocket.

"*Oui,*" Fleriot continued, speaking in brisk spurts, "we located his home — if you can call it that. He lived in a cellar on the Cité — within ten minutes of the Prefecture itself. A black hole with a broken cot. Some *concierge* allowed him to sleep there for almost nothing. The place was filthy. It smelled like a sewer. Only a rat could live like that."

As he talked, Fleriot now delved into the wallet.

"He hasn't been there for two days, the *concierge* said. But such absences are frequent, it seems. I'm having the place closely watched, but I scarcely suppose he'll dare return now. Those babbling newspapers have reported that we're looking for him."

"You found something in his cellar ?" Ixell asked, peering at the wallet.

Fleriot nodded.

"Not much," he admitted. "The place was barren. But we dug an old pair of torn trousers out of a corner — I thought it was a rag. And out of a pocket we took this — nothing more."

The detective suddenly waved a slip of folded paper he had extracted from his wallet. Evidently it was old; its edges were discolored, its creases were irregular. As he extended it to Ixell, he commented, "A note of some kind. Written quite long ago. I don't

know how much bearing it can have upon the present case — possibly none at all."

Carefully, Barron Ixell opened the paper on his lap. And his brows rose in wonder as he read a message printed in capital letters by typewriter:

RGPYL K RGMMPYPFX IFKYZ SF KL XGYG
KRPE ZP MK EVKMHSSP

Fleriot leaned back and grunted. "Some sort of code with which I'm not familiar," he confessed. "I gave a copy of it to the experts at the Prefecture. Perhaps they can find the key."

"Perhaps *we* can," observed Ixell.

"On the way here, I tried," declared the detective, "but I didn't succeed very — well, brilliantly."

The American looked across the paper at his friend; the merest suspicion of a smile lurked about his eyes.

"Just how far *did* you get with it, Fleriot?" he queried.

The Prefecture operative shrugged.

"I believe," he said, "that I decoded the letter K. It represents A. That much, I think, is obvious. If we concede that the note was sent to Louis the Silent, it must be in French, for Louis knew no other language. And in French, there are only two letters which can stand alone as words. One is A, which can mean either 'to,' in its various senses, or 'has' — that is, a part of the verb *avoir,* 'to have.'"

As Fleriot paused, Ixell nodded appreciatively. The detective proceeded.

"The other is Y. That, less frequent than A, means

'there' or 'therein.' I am disposed to favor the A, however. It is much more common." He gestured with his hand. "And that is as far as I got."

Ixell sat silent, regarding the paper on his lap. Minutes passed, while the hum of Paris surged through the open window.

Then, suddenly, the American rose and strode to the telephone. As Detective Fleriot stared in astonishment, Ixell spoke to the hotel clerk. He requested that one of the hotel's typewriters — one with a standard keyboard, if the clerk pleased — be sent up to the room !

"You have a clue to that code ?" Fleriot demanded, somewhat excitedly.

Ixell smiled. "Not quite a clue," he corrected. "Merely an idea. I shall need a typewriter to study it more carefully." He stood in the centre of the chamber, relighting his panatela, and eyed Fleriot through his puffs of smoke. "Perhaps," he added presently, "this note has nothing in the world to do with 'Monsieur Satan,' despite the odd circumstance that it is in code. Nevertheless, it is worthy of our efforts at decoding. We shall see."

When a bellboy had left a typewriter on the table — visibly puzzled by the task he had been requested to perform — Barron Ixell sat before the machine. At his left lay the puzzling note, salvaged from the ragged pocket of Louis the Silent. At his right, a blank paper and a pencil awaited his notations.

Ixell began to work — simply by peering steadily and thoughtfully at the keyboard of the typewriter.

Detective Fleriot, standing behind him, looked down over his shoulder and wondered what thoughts were racing under that brown-haired, bent head.

The smoke of the panatela billowed up about the American criminologist, hung in grey undulations over the table. He appeared to forget his companion.

But Fleriot had no objection to neglect. After fifteen minutes of watching, of frowning, of pondering, he turned away to the window and stared out over Paris. He had thoughts of his own — plenty of other problems to solve. He wondered when the Prefecture would trace the elusive Doctor Golez, registered but not domiciled at the Hotel Cambrai. Who was Golez ? Could it be another name for — "Monsieur Satan" ?

And who was the brown-moustached man, so persistently identified with the activities of the Paris terror ?

Fleriot had, that morning, stopped at the hospital to visit Rodney Arnold. There he had encountered again the cadaverous Monsieur Lamacor, the jeweller; and Monsieur Lamacor had, once more, whispered his suspicions concerning the evasive Doctor Golez.

Later in the morning, Detective Deche of the insurance company had come to the Prefecture in an effort to learn whether any progress had been made in the baffling case. He had read, with dismay, the sardonic articles in the papers; and he declared that their jeering attitude toward the Prefecture served no purpose save to stimulate criminal contempt for law.

Fleriot, scowling out of the window, was exceedingly

worried. The ugly mystery had gone too far. The police had accomplished much too little. Even now no one could prophesy how soon another caged pigeon would be delivered at somebody's doorstep — how soon another murder would be committed. Perhaps today, tomorrow; perhaps it had already ——

"Well, Fleriot, I believe I have it !"

At the cheery sound of Barron Ixell's voice, the Prefecture man whirled around, staring. A moment he hesitated, gaped at the paper in Ixell's fingers with incredulous surprise. Then he strode forward and took the sheet. Two sentences were written across it, one in French, the other an English translation:

Viens a Villeneuf quand tu as fini avec de la Chalotte.
Come to Villeneuf when you have finished with de la Chalotte.

"Sapristi !" ejaculated the amazed Frenchman. "How did you get that ? And de la Chalotte — *sacré ciel,* that is the millionaire who sent 'Monsieur Satan' the pearl necklace — the man who succumbed to the terrorism !"

Ixell nodded. He had turned back to the table and, on another paper, was rapidly marking a copy of the typewriter's keyboard.

"How did you get it ?" excitedly repeated the detective.

Ixell quickly raised his head as he thrust the paper into his pocket. "I'll explain all that to you in the automobile," he said rapidly. "We mustn't lose more time than necessary. Do you know where this Villeneuf is ?"

"Mais certainement!" Fleriot declared, his eyes shining. "It is a small town — merely a village — some sixty-five kilometers out of the Porte de Versailles! We can be there in an hour — an hour and a half at the most!"

As he rose, Barron Ixell was startlingly alert and energetic — not at all the man who had lain unconscious the previous night.

"Fleriot," he said quietly, though a queer vibrance tingled in his tones, "if you telephone the Prefecture for a fast car and several men who aren't afraid of a possible fight, we may arrest 'Monsieur Satan' today!"

The detective required no second urging. He had already snatched up the telephone with an eager, hard-gripping hand. His eyes were brilliantly expectant.

"And — " said Barron Ixell, "ask them to bring along the homing pigeon you received from Rodney Arnold!"

CHAPTER VIII

VILLENEUF

WITHIN twenty-five minutes, two powerful Department automobiles charged out of the Porte de Versailles, their motors roaring, their chauffeurs tensed as they bent over the quivering steering wheels. In the first car, Barron Ixell and Detective Armand Fleriot sat with three *agents de police;* the second was filled with uniformed men. Fleriot grasped a wooden bird cage between his knees and listened intently to Ixell's discourse on the coded note.

"Typewritten codes," the criminal expert was saying, "are very often based upon some mechanical manipulations of the keyboard; I have dealt with dozens of them, and it has always seemed to me that a considerable percentage of them must have been evolved with the aid of a writing machine. One of the most interesting cryptograms I ever encountered was based entirely on the use of punctuation marks; to solve the cipher's riddle, it was necessary to study the position of those marks on a certain typewriter's keyboard. But, of course, that one was invented by a genius. And as for this one used with Louis the Silent — well, its originator was by no means a skillful cryptographist."

"He puzzled *me,*" declared Fleriot.

"Because you approached the code as if it were something of infinite complexity, instead of something almost laughably simple," said Ixell. From his pocket he took the copy of the keyboard he had hastily scribbled before leaving his hotel.

"Consider Louis' note," he suggested, placing that frayed paper under his own markings. The wind produced by the automobile's speed whipped the slips, flapped them, but Ixell held them down on his knees. "As you yourself told me, Fleriot, the single letter K must represent either A or Y. Very well. We will accept that hypothesis. And now——" obliquely, he glanced at the detective "—instead of studying the code, let us study Louis the Silent!"

Fleriot jerked up his head. He was never easily bewildered, but now he stared at Ixell in obvious confusion.

"Louis the Silent—"

"Exactly," said the American. "What do we know of him? We know he is a miserable, ragged, uneducated descendant of the sewer rats. Is that not so?"

"Even worse," agreed the detective, trying to pierce Ixell's thoughts.

"We know, also—at least, we have every reason to believe—that he is in the service of 'Monsieur Satan.' Consequently, a note addressed to him would very likely be one of instructions or command. At any rate, for the sake of a basis of procedure, we are justified in assuming such a man as Louis the Silent, when receiving a letter from a creature such as 'Monsieur Satan,' would be written to in a commanding tone."

"Parfait," concurred the absorbed Detective Fleriot, while the *agents de police* listened in interest no less profound.

"On this theory," resumed Barron Ixell, "let us again examine the coded note. In the ordinary phrase of command, ninety-nine times in a hundred, the imperative verb is the first word. 'Go home' — 'give me that' — 'come to such-and-such a spot.' "

"I understand," murmured Fleriot.

"In writing to an uneducated, almost illiterate man like Louis the Silent, only simple and direct phraseology, it is reasonable to presume, was employed."

"C'est ça," the Prefecture man acquiesced.

"Look at the first word in cipher," Ixell directed, pointing to it. Fleriot frowned at the letters: RGPYL. "We are in search of a simple, five-lettered word of command, such as Louis the Silent would be apt to understand readily. I won't bother about going through the list of them which occurred to me, but I finally accepted as the most plausible the word *viens*. In English, 'come.' One of the things which made me accept it as a possibility, was the fact that it was immediately followed by the single letter K — and this, by your own explanation, Fleriot, could be considered as meaning A — or, in English, 'to.' It fitted neatly. That gave us *viens a* — meaning 'come to.' "

Now the Prefecture ace suddenly looked up at Ixell, a strange glow in his narrow eyes. He smiled somewhat grimly.

"Monsieur Ixell," he said, "this is the first time in

my life I have witnessed the decoding of a cryptogram through a study of human nature."

Wryly the American elevated one brow.

"Most codes," he replied quietly, "would be easier to understand if we could know something about the men who used them. Shall I go on ?"

"Please do !"

"The rest is easy, and yet somewhat difficult, too. According to our hypothesis, we already have six letters decoded. If you will count through the entire message, you will discover that only nine additional letters are employed in the forming of the whole sentence. We might, of course, try a process of filling in — but that, being a task of guesses, is apt to lead us astray. Besides, it would not yield the complete code — and I wanted to know it."

"You found it of course ?" asked Fleriot.

"Yes. Through a rather mechanical or mathematical process. I can scarcely explain it through logic. It was a matter of studying the typewriter's keyboard. That consumed most of the time. But eventually, I caught the key. Simply, as I said, by calculation — or perhaps observation is the more correct term. I found that, in the code, every letter used was the *seventh following the one for which it was intended.*"

"The seventh —— ?"

"Counting toward the right, and going from the completion of one line of keys to the beginning of the one below it. Study this copy of the keyboard — a standard one, incidentally, you notice — and you will see what I mean. If the count runs off the bottom

line, you start again at the top. Thus, if you desire the letter V, you count seven and strike the letter R."

"Sapristi!" Detective Fleriot's eyes were round.

As he replaced the papers in his pocket, Barron Ixell said:

"Louis the Silent must have carried a copy of the keyboard with him. Now——" Keenly his eyes peered ahead. "I have an idea, you know, that this village, Villeneuf, plays an important part in the activities of 'Monsieur Satan' and his crowd. It may be — it *may,* I say — be the home of those pigeons!"

The two great, open cars roared on, plunging along a tree-guarded highway that never curved, never forsook its severe straightness. When Versailles had been passed — that tomb of Bourbon pomp, as Fleriot commented, whose garden nooks once rang with scarlet laughter — the road led abruptly into flat, low country.

On either side of the racing cars lay vast fields, effusive with splendid crops — crops whose golden glory represented the continued toil of centuries. A round, crimson sun was dipping toward the purple horizon. Ixell stared at it until his eyes grew moist. It hung blazing — the sort of sunset that could make an artist dream. Now, the thriving farm lands stretched russet and brown and green and copper. Trees cast shadows that were almost blue. Magpies darted in swift couples, vanishing almost as soon as they appeared.

It was the sort of scene for which Millet yearned — the sort of sunset to which Turner gave his soul.

A blazing, burning, impassioned twilight, elevating the pastoral flatness to a realm of fantastic beauty. A symphony of color at once thrilling and awesome. And, through all this, two automobiles were charging furiously in the hope of smashing the career of a ruthless killer.

They reached Villeneuf after the sun had buried itself in the horizon.

It was a tiny village of perhaps two score dwellings. At Ixell's suggestion, the cars went directly to the general store.

Only Fleriot and Barron Ixell entered the shop. And there an amazingly corpulent woman with a mountain of white hair and cheeks like polished Normandy apples, greeted them with the impeccable formality of a duchess. She stood beside her counter, beaming after her bow. The gentlemen desired what —— ?

When she had seen, with startled eyes, that outside two automobiles loaded with uniformed *agents de police* were waiting, her demeanor slightly altered. She became perceptibly uneasy, her tongue slipping out to wet her lips.

Fleriot told her this was a police inquisition, then yielded the questioning to Barron Ixell.

"Madame," the American began, "we are seeking someone here in Villeneuf — or near Villeneuf — who keeps pigeons. Homing pigeons. Perhaps you can help us."

She considered. After an interval, she shook her enormous head.

"No, m'sieu'. Not homing pigeons."

"Others —— ?"

"*Mais certes,*" she declared, "almost every family in or around Villeneuf has a few pigeons about its house. But none, as far as I know, has homing pigeons. No, m'sieu'. I am positive."

"In that case," said Ixell, "will you be kind enough to sell us a ball of stout, good twine ?"

The abrupt manner in which he put the request rather disconcerted the woman, but she complied readily enough. When Ixell and Fleriot emerged from the small store, they carried their purchase and a new plan which the American had formulated.

Five minutes later both Department cars stopped beside the fields outside Villeneuf. At Fleriot's command, the entire group of uniformed men descended to the road. It was almost dark; a deep grey twilight encompassed them. From the branch of a tree, two magpies eyed them curiously.

Stepping out of his car, Barron Ixell — tall and unusually vibrant in his manner — carried the caged homing pigeon which had, two days earlier, been delivered at the Hotel Dulac for Rodney Arnold. He placed it on the ground, stooped beside it, and took the ball of strong twine from Detective Fleriot. The Prefecture man himself lifted the panicky, fluttering bird out of its cage and firmly held it while Ixell securely bound the end of the twine around its leg.

And while he worked, the American spoke to the crowd of *agents de police.*

"We believe," he said, "that somewhere in the vi-

cinity of this village — perhaps within a kilometer of this spot — is a place vitally concerned with the activities of the 'Satan' gang. Whether we are right, we shall soon learn. The country around us is flat and it should not be difficult for us to run across it. I am going to release this pigeon — let him go up as if he were a kite on a string. We'll have to run after him — to follow his course. He'll probably go straight homeward — and it's his home we want. If he flies too fast for us, I have the twine with which to hold him back. It may work — and it may not. We're taking the chance." He paused, looked around at the startled faces.

"Are you ready, gentlemen ?"

There was an instant's pause.

"All right, Fleriot," snapped Ixell. "Let the bird go !"

CHAPTER IX

PIGEON CHASE

CERTAINLY, it was the weirdest, most unusual chase in which any of those men had ever participated — and some of them had pursued savage criminals through the alleys of old Paris. Inclusive of the two chauffeurs, there were thirteen armed runners, madly racing after one small bird.

Barron Ixell, in the lead, held the twine; his actions vastly resembled those of a boy following a kite in a strong wind. He had let out perhaps fifty yards of the cord, so that the pigeon was compelled to fly low and no faster than the men could run.

Distinctly, the bird was terrified by its restraining leash. At the beginning it had circled, plunged upward and down again, in a futile effort to free itself. For some five minutes it had rebelled, refusing to follow any straight course.

And then, suddenly, it had streaked away.

Its tug on Ixell's hand was astonishingly forceful. Sometimes, he was constrained to allow a few inches of twine to slip through his fingers. After a time, however, he knew the thing could be done. Where aeroplanes had failed, men — running over flat country — could succeed !

Their dashing progress across the farm country was far from merciful, since they could not avoid pounding their way over fertile, burgeoning fields. But it was better to cut a devastated path over thriving grounds than to allow "Monsieur Satan" to continue his devastating career.

They ran furiously through the darkness, their eyes fixed on the black speck winging against a background of spangled heavens. After a while Detective Fleriot gasped.

"Suppose its goal is miles away —— !"

He was uttering the thoughts of all thirteen men.

They had gone less than a kilometer at that taxing pace when Ixell decided it was time to rest. Every man was panting laboriously. Some were stumbling.

He began to draw the twine — gently first, then more and more insistently until, at last, he stopped and pulled in the pigeon as a fisherman might land a struggling, flopping, fighting trout.

"We'd better sit down and get our breath," he advised. "We may need it badly — later."

The crowd of uniformed pursuers acceded with as much gratitude as promptitude. Ixell, dropping to sit on the ground with the rest, held the bird snugly under his arm.

No one spoke. Most of the men sprawled flat on their backs, panting and perspiring copiously. Detective Fleriot, whose age had begun to conquer his energetic will, had fallen behind the crowd. When he reached it, he sank beside Ixell and gasped there without attempting a single syllable.

For perhaps fifteen minutes, they relaxed themselves to utter repose. And after that interval, they were, for the most part, quite reinvigorated. No longer was anyone panting.

Barron Ixell sprang to his feet. "Ready for the next lap ?"

And the chase was resumed.

In all, there were, that night, four "laps," as Ixell termed them. It was during the fourth that they encountered the difficulty — and its astounding development.

They had, in three and a half stages of running, crossed almost as many kilometers of flat farm country. All of them were on the verge of complete exhaustion. No longer able to run in a group, they were scattered over some two hundred yards, with Ixell still in the lead and Detective Fleriot a sad last.

The pigeon, tugging mightily at the twine, maintained a straight, definite course. Against the starlit skies its body was little more than a vague, dark smudge. Long ago the policemen had ceased trying to watch it. Now they watched only Ixell, followed him rather than the bird.

And suddenly Barron Ixell saw, directly in front of him though still at some distance, the shadowy, looming wall of tall trees.

Immediately he began to retard his pace, again to pull in the unwilling and battling bird. Within a hundred yards of the trees he finally halted and tucked the squirming pigeon under his arm. He waited un-

til all of the others stood around him, panting, hot, soaked with perspiration.

Even before he could gather sufficient breath to speak coherently, everyone was lying on the ground. He joined them. And presently he said, steadily enough:

"We can't run like this through a forest. The bird was flying straight toward those trees. And we can't——" He smiled a little. "——fly a kite among trees."

"Wh-what's to be done, then, m'sieu'?" an *agent* panted.

Ixell nodded his head toward the looming forest.

"We know the direction in which we were going. We'll simply have to walk through the woods and release the pigeon again on the other side."

"But m'sieu'!" another *agent* cried, almost protesting. "I know this *bois*. At least, I know its size. It is more than four kilometers to the other end."

"We'll have to go through,'" snapped the American decisively. And though he was doubtless the most worn of them all, Detective Fleriot valiantly and doggedly nodded. His indomitable determination affected everyone. Within ten minutes, the group was on its feet, prepared to continue the uncertain hunt.

They entered the forest slowly, walking among the tall, gloomy trees in single file — much like Indians breaking a trail. Barron Ixell did not lead now; he conceded that privilege to the *agent* who had claimed some knowledge of the region. The pigeon, cooing

from time to time, still nestled under the American's arm.

Here, it was black — black with no starlight penetrating the dense canopy of summer foliage. The policeman in the van might have been a boatless Charon, conducting a line of lost souls into a Stygian fastness. Moving, cautiously, the men occasionally lifted arms to touch one another or to prevent collision with those great, stark tree-trunks. It was like walking among petrified ghouls. To advance was a matter of instinct as much as of sight.

And yet it was by far less strength-sapping than to dash wildly across flat fields. Here, at any rate, no one lost his breath.

In this aboriginal manner they crossed the forest and were on the brink of clear country again when the leader, who first emerged from the trees, abruptly halted — so abruptly, indeed, that several of his followers collided.

"Nom d'un saint!" he whispered in a sudden access of agitation.

Very softly, yet sharply Barron Ixell called:

"What is it?"

"Pardieu, m'sieu' — a light!"

Immediately the file became an eager, palpitant huddle with Ixell and Fleriot in its centre. Everyone seemed keenly aware of the fact that a crisis had been reached. A pulsation, achieving the proportions of a heavy throb, seized them all. They stood tense, peering ahead at a ramshackle, sagging wreck of a hut in whose window burned a yellow speck ——

"Nobody has lived in that place for years!" the recent leader asserted in a rapid whisper. "I know the house. I have seen it often. It is almost a ruin. Somebody built it as a sort of shelter, years ago, when they were clearing a patch of woods over there. But it has been deserted for ——"

Unexpectedly Barron Ixell interrupted, thrusting the pigeon into an *agent's* hands: "You men wait here, please!" Then, before even Fleriot could speak, he was gone.

Between the forest's edge and the strange hut, several hundred feet of profusely bush-covered ground intervened, and into this Ixell vanished.

He returned within ten minutes, and when he confronted the group, his voice, though extremely low, was taut and hard. He darted glances at every strained countenance, as if measuring the ability of the men. Those faces were grey masks, floating in blackness.

"There are three men inside the place," he announced. "Possibly there are more whom I couldn't see through the window, however. One is Louis the Silent."

"Sapristi!" exclaimed Fleriot, his eyes at once beginning to sparkle; eyes that were luminous jewels in the darkness.

"Another," said Ixell, "is a thickset man with a large brown moustache — the chauffeur of the automobile from which Rodney Arnold was shot. The third, I never saw before."

Once more he paused to inspect this crowd of uniformed men who had so staunchly followed him in

his long, wild chase. Then, as though everything had been unalterably planned, he told them:

"We will form a wide circle around the hut and draw in quietly from all sides. To attack by surprise may save a great many shots." Detective Fleriot added some cautioning instructions of his own, emphasizing the point that three men in a hut might, unless swiftly seized, defend themselves at a price costly to the attackers. He, it was decided, would give the signal for the final rush on the hut — a shot from his automatic.

"And don't," he warned the man who held the homing pigeon, "let go of that bird until the instant you run upon the shack. Its coming to the place too soon would be almost a message to them !"

The group of thirteen men dissolved with uncanny silence, vanishing among the high bushes like so many wraiths. Presently, there was no sign, no sound, no hint to indicate their movements. Only here and there, the top of a shrub quivered as if a slight breeze had drifted across it.

Fleriot and Ixell remained together, advancing directly toward the light. Because theirs was the shortest approach, they soon halted in the realization that it would be unwise to proceed farther. Crouching behind a clump of bushes, they were within twelve yards of the illumined window. Both had drawn automatics. Fleriot, however, withheld his signal, intent on allowing the *agents* at least ten minutes to form their hemming circle.

Through the twigs of the shrubs, the Prefecture man could clearly discern, in the window, the lean,

horribly scarred countenance of Louis the Silent. He was talking to someone invisible, but his words could not be distinguished. And once, he grinned in a manner that distorted his scar hideously.

At last Ixell said, "I think it is time, Fleriot."

The detective nodded. He raised his gun, poised himself for the rush — and fired.

That staccato pistol crack transformed the silence into volcanic, roaring pandemonium. From all sides bulky shadows sprang out of nothingness to hurl themselves upon the small hut. The stamp of charging feet, bewildered and terrified cries within the shack, the sudden extinction of the light, a screamed oath — and a homing pigeon gently fluttering to the roof ——

Ixell and Fleriot were the first to enter the darkened hut. They plunged wildly into the door at the instant the lamp was smashed. The American glimpsed a keen, glistening blade being snapped up, and he leapt at it to grasp the wrist of Louis the Silent.

He caught that slim, eel-like arm, wrenched it backward with sudden viciousness, and the knife clattered on the floor. But even as Louis the Silent cried in pain, Ixell saw something else.

A thickset figure, momentarily silhouetted against the window, was turning a long revolver toward him !

His own automatic, blocked by Louis' squirming body, could not be raised quickly enough. Instinctively Ixell dodged, dropped almost to the floor, as the shot crashed in the thundering hut.

Almost simultaneously, another gun roared — the weapon of Fleriot, this time. And the figure at the window, uttering a strange, choked snarl, lunged forward, reeled, and fell heavily.

That fantastic battle lasted little more than half a minute.

When it was ended, Louis the Silent and another man stood trembling and spluttering almost hysterically in the fierce grips of policemen. Their late companion lay sprawling against the wall of the shack — not stirring ——

"Lights !" cried Fleriot. "Lights !"

With the aid of matches, an *agent* discovered another oil lamp, tucked in the corner of a shelf. Its sickly, quivering glow revealed a strange, tumultuous scene.

The entire group of policemen, having suffered no casualties, crowded the shack. In the unreal light, their faces were menacingly yellow as they glowered at the two prisoners.

Barron Ixell was stooping over the motionless body of the man who had attempted to shoot him. When he straightened, his own features were more yellow than any of the others'. Detective Fleriot knew, after a single glance at the American's countenance, that the man of the brown moustache was dead ——

Perhaps the most astonishing thing in that barren hut was the crude, large, wire cage which occupied the entire length of a wall. In that awkward coop a dozen terrified, panic-whipped pigeons continuously

struggled to beat their way to freedom. This was the roost of the devil's pigeons! Here, then, were the headquarters of "Monsieur Satan!"

Louis the Silent, feeling the click of handcuffs about his wrists, suddenly destroyed his claim to muteness by emitting a most stinging and virulent oath. The man beside him — he appeared scarcely to have outgrown his boyhood stage — was less demonstrative. As the manacles were put on him, he stood as pale and unresponsive as an ivory carving. Apparently, Detective Fleriot recognized the fellow, for he was muttering:

"This is your third arrest, eh, Flacard? Well, it will be your last!"

"Who is he?" Ixell asked.

"One of our regular 'characters' — a sneak and a pickpocket."

"But *non d'un nom!*" an agitated *agent* abruptly expostulated, his voice confused and bewildered. "Who, then, is 'Monsieur Satan'?"

The blurted question fell upon the hut like a stunning blow. There was a moment of complete, floundering stillness. Who *was* "Monsieur Satan"? Surely not one of these two slender relics of Parisian sewer rats! Surely not the man with the brown moustache, now dead on the floor, who had served merely as chauffeur and emissary! Who ——

It was Louis the Silent, rising to a pitch of harsh, jeering triumph, who answered. He threw up his chin. His mocking eyes blazed in victorious defiance.

His lips twisted back in an ugly sneer. And he almost laughed his reply:

"You will never know — now !"

"Why not ?" snapped Fleriot. "We'll make *you* talk !"

"You can't !" retorted Louis, still in that jeering voice. "You can't because I *don't know* who he is ! And neither does Flacard." He pointed to the figure on the floor. "*He* was the only one of us who knew our boss. He was the only one who could tell you. And ——" His grin became horrible. "— and you have killed him !"

CHAPTER X

DOCTOR GOLEZ

HABITUALLY Monsieur de Saintville, the grey bearded Prefect of Police, departed from his expensively appointed office at half-past four in the afternoon. With a characteristically French conception of the comparative values of work and pleasure, he seldom devoted himself to official tasks in the evenings: these he reserved for the social recreations and the social contacts which had, in no small degree, assisted him in achieving his eminent position at the Prefecture. He had always believed and always acted upon the theory that an hour devoted to influential friends is worth ten hours devoted to work. Not that he had not labored also to attain his Prefectship; there were few more efficient policemen on the force than Monsieur de Saintville himself. But he had known how to maintain a nice balance between that labor and the necessary *politesse* which, together, insure success.

On the night of the raid at Villeneuf, however, Monsieur de Saintville destroyed his customary routine. He remained at his office in the Prefecture, smoking

innumerable cigarettes and striding about his red carpet nervously, impatiently.

That a formidable force had gone to the village with Fleriot and Ixell, he knew. And he was waiting to hear the results of the sally — waiting as anxiously as a candidate on election night. On his great desk lay a bundle of newspapers whose sarcastic and even vituperative tone was becoming insupportable. They were demanding more action in the case of "Monsieur Satan" — and blaming Monsieur de Saintville for the Prefecture's blundering failure to apprehend that criminal.

The Prefect had been muttering to himself for almost an hour when, shortly before midnight, Detective Fleriot finally arrived.

Fleriot, in a state of tense excitement, sat down with the Prefect and related, somewhat breathlessly, all that had occurred. Louis the Silent and Flacard, the two prisoners, were in cells; Mariot, the man of the brown moustache, lay in the Prefecture morgue. He described the night's exploit in vivid detail, and Monsieur de Saintville's eyes, as he listened, burned. Here was a sop at last for those shouting papers — and a superb accomplishment in police annals! The Prefect was proud, yet agitatedly apprehensive. Where — who — was "Monsieur Satan" himself? How was *he* to be traced?

"Monsieur Ixell has gone back to his hotel?" the official asked.

Fleriot nodded his white head. A moment Monsieur de Saintville frowned down at his pencil — the

inevitable pencil, always tapping the desk. Then he looked up, and a strange glow lurked in his eyes.

"Eh bien, Fleriot," he said softly, "you have done much tonight. Very much. Now — I have news for *you!"*

"News —— ?"

"Concerning Doctor Golez !"

Fleriot, catching his breath, quickly leaned forward. His small eyes were keen, piercing. For two days he had been wondering about the elusive Doctor Golez, that strange man who had entered the shops of Monsieur Lamacor and so many other jewelers. Would Doctor Golez be a synonym for "Monsieur Satan ?"

"Early this evening," slowly said the Prefect, "the Hotel Cambrai telephoned. I myself spoke to its manager. He told me that a package had just been found in the hotel's courtyard. Who brought it there, no one knows. It was simply left. It might have been there for hours before being noticed. And the package was addressed to — Doctor Golez."

In incredulous amazement, Fleriot cried, "Not another pigeon !"

"Yes, precisely that — another pigeon," gravely said the Prefect. "We have it here at the Prefecture. Its attached note demands of Doctor Golez that he surrender a certain pearl necklace !"

For a full minute, the detective sat stunned, staring. If this Doctor Golez were a victim of the frightful criminal, and not *the criminal* — Fleriot's theories were being exploded, suddenly. Mentally, he reeled a little. He licked his thin lips, rubbed a rather unsteady hand

over his stiff, small, white moustache. A troubled shadow lay across his countenance.

"I think —" he began, only to have his conjecture interrupted by the unexpected tinkle of the telephone on Monsieur de Saintville's desk.

Astonished, both men stared at the instrument. There was something strangely, inexplicably premonitory in the sudden puncturing of the office silence by that whirring bell. It had burst upon Fleriot's incipient words; it had crushed them.

The Prefect himself, after an instant, answered. And immediately, his heavy brows arched high in surprise.

"Ah, Monsieur Ixell !" he exclaimed. For a while he listened, and his eyes grew steadily larger. Finally he snapped, *"Attendez !* I will let you speak to Fleriot himself !"

The detective actually snatched the telephone from his superior's extended hand. *"Allo !"* he exclaimed, sensing that something of tremendous importance must have occurred to elicit this midnight call. *"Allo !"*

"Hello, Fleriot," came Barron Ixell's steady voice. "Can you be here, at my hotel, with a few men, at once ?"

"But certainly ! What ——"

"I have spoken to the Hotel Cambrai," said Ixell briskly. "They told me all about the pigeon left for Doctor Golez. If you'll pick me up here in a few minutes, Fleriot, we'll arrest 'Monsieur Satan' within half an hour !"

"You — you *know who he is?*" almost shouted the detective, rising as his face colored.

"I do," said Ixell. "Hurry along, Fleriot. I'll tell you all about it when you arrive."

But Detective Fleriot did not alone conduct half a dozen *agents de police* toward the bewildering hope of seizing "Monsieur Satan." He was accompanied in that task by the Prefect himself, so excited by the promise of Ixell that he could not restrain himself from joining the midnight expedition.

Again they travelled in the powerful Department automobiles. When they reached the hotel in the Champs Elysées, they found the American criminologist, in top-coat and wide-brimmed felt hat, awaiting them at its entrance.

Barron Ixell sprang into the leading car, occupying the space made for him between Fleriot and Monsieur de Saintville. He bent forward and told the chauffeur.

"Number 27 Rue des Voisins ! But stop at least a block away from the house !"

Then he leaned back; and they saw that his long countenance was strangely hard, yet tingling with visible energy. His eyes were narrowed against the wind as the car plunged forward, followed by the second Department automobile; eyes that were brilliant and expectant.

"I owe you an explanation, gentlemen," he said, even before Fleriot could question him about the address. "Let me start at once, and at the beginning."

His curt, decisive tone completely stilled both the

detective and Monsieur de Saintville. If they had been on the verge of uttering a hundred queries, they realized the futility of such volubility. The strain on Barron Ixell's features — the quality of his voice — his very manner rendered inquiries superfluous. They regarded him in silent, profound eagerness. And while the automobiles hissed down the Champs Elysées to the Place de la Concorde, turned to cross the black Seine reflecting a thousand golden lights, and plunged into the mystery of the Left Bank, Ixell spoke.

"Two days before Rodney Arnold received his caged pigeon," he said, "a man who called himself Doctor Golez, and who was studying the case of 'Monsieur Satan,' resolved to pursue a course of investigation which would be wholly his own. He wanted to work alone. He *had* to work alone.

"You have noticed, of course, that the crimes of 'Monsieur Satan' revealed his startling knowledge of what occurred in jewellers' circles. He always appeared to know when and where some valuable piece of jewellry was purchased — and by whom. Consequently, it was reasonable to suppose 'Monsieur Satan' was connected, in some manner, with the jewellers or with the jewellry business.

"Doctor Golez proceeded on that theory — and on the theory that 'Monsieur Satan' would send his pigeon to anyone whom he believed to have bought a very costly piece of jewellry. All his previous crimes were based upon articles purchased in the finer stores on the Rue de la Paix. Therefore, Doctor Golez believed that

the man must have some connection with those shops on the Rue de la Paix — some means of knowing the trend of their business — some means of learning of their more important sales. You follow me, gentlemen ?"

Detective Fleriot, frowning, muttered, "Go on, please !" The Prefect merely nodded.

"Doctor Golez wondered whether it might be — one of the jewellers himself !" Ixell paused a second, his glance darting from Fleriot to Monsieur de Saintville. "He decided to test the supposition. On the day before Rodney Arnold was threatened, Doctor Golez entered twenty-nine of the more exclusive jewellry shops in Paris — most of them on or near the Rue de la Paix. In each place, he requested to be shown a certain very valuable piece of jewellry exhibited in the window. But he bought nothing. As he explained to Monsieur Lamacor and others, he had just purchased another thing very similar to the one shown, and he desired only to compare quality and prices.

"But Doctor Golez used a different jewel in each shop ! That is, at Monsieur Lamacor's, he said he had recently bought a pearl necklace. At Carot's it was a diamond brooch. At Benoit's, earrings. Very valuable earrings, of course. And so on. Naturally, Doctor Golez retained a careful record of the jewels he mentioned in each shop. You understand, gentlemen ?"

They did understand. They were, indeed, begin-

ning to appreciate very many amazing things, and their countenances were dumbfounded. As the cars curved into a narrow, dark street — the Rue des Voisins — Barron Ixell resumed:

"This was Doctor Golez's plan: He wished to create the impression, in every shop, that he owned recently purchased and valuable jewels. He wished to receive one of the caged pigeons. He wished, in short, to tempt 'Monsieur Satan.' If the criminal did succumb to the lure, much would be gained. According to his demand, the source of his knowledge would be decided. Thus, if he demanded of Doctor Golez a certain diamond brooch, his information could be traced to Carot's. If he demanded the earrings, it could be traced to Benoit's. If he asked for the pearl necklace ——"

"Monsieur Lamacor's !" expostulated the Prefect of Police, gaping. He looked past Ixell at Fleriot, but the detective, his features very taut, sat motionless, narrow-eyed, intent on the account.

"Exactly," said Barron Ixell. "As we now know, 'Monsieur Satan' did leap at the bait. He sent Doctor Golez a pigeon today — probably by one of those three men we found hiding in Villeneuf. The fact that he demanded the pearl necklace — which Doctor Golez had mentioned *only* in Monsieur Lamacor's store — made it quite clear that he had obtained his knowledge from that particular shop."

Of a sudden, Detective Fleriot's hand touched Ixell's knee. The Frenchman asked:

"Of course, then, you are ——"

"I am Doctor Golez — of course," admitted Barron Ixell, with an odd, tight smile. "If I kept it secret from others, Fleriot, it was because the entire success of the venture depended on secrecy. But I know you will understand ——"

"Quite," said Fleriot, a momentary smile on his own lips. "In fact, I may add that, knowing you so long, I should have suspected you hadn't been asleep until the Arnold affair. But please continue."

Barron Ixell's countenance at once assumed its former seriousness. He spoke quickly now, for the cars were approaching Number 27.

"When I was in Monsieur Lamacor's shop — rather convincingly disguised, I dare say, with the Van Dyke, pince-nez, and tropical clothes — several other people were present. Monsieur Lamacor, his clerks, Detective Deche of the insurance company, Rodney Arnold, and an inquisitive bookkeeper who constantly thrust his head out of a rear door. One of these men was, I felt, *our* man! The demand for the pearl necklace could mean little else.

"And so tonight, half an hour ago, I began telephoning. First I called the home of Monsieur Lamacor. When he answered, I said, '*Allo!* This is Flacard speaking! Mariot and Louis got into a crazy fight at the shack, and Mariot is stabbed. He told me to rush in and call you. Louis ran away ——'" Ixell paused. "I had gone that far," he proceeded evenly, "when Monsieur Lamacor stopped me to say that I had the wrong number. He knew nobody by those names.

"But the second telephone call — in which I used precisely the same words — brought different results. The man answered, *'Nom d'un chien,* how did you get this number ?' I told him Mariot had gasped it to me, that Mariot was badly slashed in his side. He said, 'Damn Mariot ! I can't come to see him before tomorrow night ! Take care of him, and don't call here again, you idiot !' He began to ask from where I was calling, but I hung up."

The car abruptly screeched to a stop, a block from Number 27. Behind it the second automobile rolled to the curb, and out of it poured the uniformed *agents.*

But Monsieur de Saintville had not stirred from his seat. His tones tingling, his eyes afire, he whispered:

"And the second man ? He was —— ?"

Ixell's mouth became a grim slit. He replied very quietly:

"A man whose position gave him a facile insight into many things occurring in the jewellry world. 'Monsieur Satan' is — Detective Deche of the insurance company !"

THE name of Detective Deche was never actually inscribed among those arrested by the Prefecture of Police. To the end he outwitted the authorities — in his own peculiar way.

He lived in a *garçonnière* — a bachelor apartment — of two small rooms on the top floor of a five-story apartment house. The police effectively surrounded the place.

Barron Ixell, Fleriot, Monsieur de Saintville, and

two uniformed *agents* went up to the lofty rooms. And with them, for strategic purposes, they took the *concierge* of the house — a tremendously agitated man in whose life this was a glaring highlight.

It was the *concierge* who rang — implicitly following police instructions. When a profound voice asked who was there, the excited man stammered something about the corridor's being full of smoke; was anything wrong in Monsieur's rooms ? He coughed mightily. One could hardly see where the smoke was coming from — it ——

There was an alarmed ejaculation. An instant later, the door was pulled open by the massive, towering Detective Deche — in pajamas.

Ixell and one of the uniformed men sprang upon Deche, gripped his arms. But the great giant, immediately comprehending the trick which had trapped him, emitted a frightful yell. His face became the color of blood. His eyes bulged, flared.

And with all the strength in his huge body, he hurled both the policeman and Barron Ixell backward. Then he turned and ran into his rooms.

Ixell, the first to recover, dashed after the man. He had drawn his automatic and leveled it at the back of the killer. He shouted a command for the man to throw up his arms.

But Deche refused to obey. Later, the papers all agreed that the criminal must have been rendered momentarily insane by the realization that he had been caught. Truly, his act was one of indisputable insanity — one of mad, desperate impulse.

He jumped. It was a flying leap aimed straight at an open window.

Those in the apartment heard his rasping voice gasp, "You never will ——" The rest was lost. It had been an almost triumphant gasp, that. What he meant, precisely, no one would, of course, ever know.

But Barron Ixell, the American criminologist who had ended one of the most ruthless criminal careers in Paris history, turned back from the window a few moments later — turned back with a face white and taut after the sight of the huddle in the street, five stories below — and he murmured:

"He robbed the world even of its justice."

BOOK III — BERLIN

THE KING OF CRIME

THE KING OF CRIME

CHAPTER I

THE VON ZOON AFFAIR

THAT remarkable sequence of events which the American student of criminology, Barron Ixell, experienced in Berlin began with an utterly deceptive lack of drama.

Actually he encountered the case when he attended the ball given by the Gräfin von Zoon — indubitably one of the most brilliant social functions of Berlin's winter season. As he entered the vast room, he halted in candid astonishment.

Even his companion — the white-haired Colonel Minford Thayer who had recently been appointed military attaché at the American Embassy — could not quell a murmur of surprised admiration.

"Glamorous, isn't it ?" he exclaimed softly.

Ixell stared. "Inconsistent !" he declared.

Colonel Thayer arched interrogative brows. "Inconsistent — ?"

But the criminologist, gazing over the swaying crowd that flowed around the dance floor, did not immediately explain his comment. For the moment he seemed fascinated by the vividness of the scene. It was

truly bizarre, as colorful as an Oriental pageant: a confusion of gaily hued evening gowns spread across the room in a bewildering kaleidoscope.

From one end of a balcony which extended entirely around the four walls of the room, an orchestra was pouring the merry lilt of "The Beautiful Blue Danube." Its conductor, himself playing an eloquent violin, beamed down over the balustrade with zest that was contagious. Gayety — the hysterical gayety of a nation struggling to forget calamity!

Colonel Thayer, however, was granting little attention to the animated display. Eying Ixell curiously, he repeated, "Why did you say 'inconsistent'?"

"Because —" the reply was thoughtful "— according to the newspapers, all these people are presumably apprehensive for the safety of their jewels tonight. And yet, some of the ladies are as resplendent with gems as jewellers' windows on Unter den Linden."

The colonel laughed. "Oh, that! Their so-called fear was largely newspaper talk," he said in a deprecating tone. "Sensational stuff. No one is really afraid. Besides, I understand that there is adequate police protection around the house. Inspektor Otto Kelmann himself is in charge. Have you met him?"

Ixell nodded. "Several times at the *Polizei-Ministerium.*"

"He's a splendid man!" affirmed the colonel. "Berlin's ace, in my opinion. He — But I say!" Abruptly he stopped and caught his friend's arm. "I've got to present you, old chap. We can't stand chattering before you've met our hosts."

They circled the dance floor, Ixell in impeccable evening attire and Colonel Thayer in dress uniform. Within a few seconds the criminologist was bowing over the infinitely soft hand of the Gräfin Henrietta von Zoon.

She was a dazzling lady with the imposing figure of a Brunhilde, erect, dominant. She had hair of a glimmering golden tint that lay heaped copiously behind a small diadem. But her vast size in no way affected the charm of her smile — though it did lend an unusually daring aspect to her gown of shimmering silver.

"Herr Ixell !" she said in quaintly accented English that imparted additional warmth to her rich voice. "I should never have forgiven Colonel Thayer if he had permitted you to remain at home !"

"Nor should I," Ixell said, laughing.

"The colonel promised some day to tell me about you; and I intend to hold him to his promise !" She darted a mischievous glance at the officer. "He always tells just enough to whet the appetite, never enough to appease it."

Ixell, smiling, turned to acknowledge an introduction to the lady's husband, the Graf Ludwig Heinrich von Zoon. He discovered his host to be a man of exceptional grace — an aristocrat who had not been wholly submerged under the tidal wave of German democracy, if appearances could be regarded as a criterion. He was handsome despite his totally bald head, shaven to a lustrous smoothness in conformity with Prussian fashion. Across his chest ran the blue

ribbon of an order. In his right eye, a monocle was securely lodged.

He bowed enchantingly and shook Ixell's white-gloved hand. For a time they chatted, until the arrival of other guests pre-empted the smile of the evening's hosts.

Then Colonel Thayer murmured, "I shall have to ask several of the ladies to dance — really one of a diplomat's important duties in these days, you know. Shall I present you ?"

"Thank you," the criminologist quickly said. "I think I should prefer to talk to Inspektor Kelmann first — if I can find him."

"Kelmann ?" The colonel looked about searchingly. "I believe I had a glimpse of him in the corridor — "

He was right. Within a minute Barron Ixell was shaking the enormous hand of Berlin's most noted detective. They strolled down the corridor and finally halted in the comparative seclusion of a little foyer behind the grand staircase.

He was a huge man, Haupt-Inspektor Otto Kelmann, at least two inches taller than six feet and possessed of a physique much like that of the aged President von Hindenburg. His great square countenance bore a jagged scar on the left cheek, which survived as the sole relic of a student duel at Heidelberg. There was a pompous dignity about him through which occasionally stole the softness of an incredibly tender smile. It was said of the grey headed officer that he was at once the most ruthless enemy

and the most compassionate friend of Berlin's underworld.

"As you see," he told Ixell, speaking in amazingly good English, "we are prepared. I hardly think anything will happen — here at the ball, at any rate."

"But later — ?"

"Poof !" Inspektor Kelmann shrugged his tremendous shoulders. "We cannot escort every guest to bed, Herr Ixell. We are doing all that is possible. I have six men distributed among the dancers and six more in the grounds outside the house. Any man that can work under such vigilance must be more than a thief — something of a magician."

"That, I think," Ixell observed, "is precisely what the papers called your enigma: a magician."

"The papers ?" Derisively Inspektor Kelmann snorted. "Phrasemakers ! They have called him many ridiculous things, Herr Ixell. One of them even referred to him as 'The King of Crime.' The king, mind you ! Bah ! What does it mean ? I'll grant you he — if it is a 'he' and not a 'they' — is a clever thief. But we'll get him ! The cleverest of thieves eventually make their mistakes. They are human."

Ixell gazed reflectively toward the door where, from time to time, some fashionably belated guest still entered.

"Inspektor," he finally murmured, "some humans can cause a great deal of trouble before they make their 'eventual mistakes.'" He looked back at the ponderous official. "This particular individual, for example

—I understand he is suspected of guilt in seven thefts ?"

"Suspected, yes," Kelmann conceded, "because the circumstances surrounding each theft were almost identical: unconscious people found in chambers from which their jewels had been taken; open windows — and that is all. Still, Herr Ixell, that is no proof that we are dealing with an *individual*. Very possibly it is a— Ah, Herr Doktor ! *Guten Abend !*"

Haupt-Inspektor Kelmann had interrupted himself to greet an extraordinarily lean and ill-complexioned gentleman who had just yielded his overcoat to a servant. His cheeks were sallow, his shoulders slightly stooped. Hair of an uncertain color lay in thin wisps around a bald circle on his somewhat pointed head.

He joined the two behind the staircase and bowed to the American criminologist.

"Of course," said Kelmann, "you have met Doktor Wanluster at the *Ministerium ?*"

Ixell had, on more than one occasion. Doktor Gustave Wanluster, admittedly one of the most eminent chemists in Berlin, was attached to the police department in the capacity of chief consultant in problems requiring expert chemical knowledge.

Unfortunately he spoke no English; and since Barron Ixell's command of German was still far from fluent, their conversations had always been somewhat difficult. But now Doktor Wanluster could not linger very long. He had come accompanied by his wife — a woman whose dark beauty was exquisitively emphasized by her creamy gown. She beckoned to him

when she emerged from a small ante-chamber, and together they slipped off to offer their respects to the Graf and Gräfin von Zoon.

"He's a fine old man," muttered Inspektor Kelmann appreciatively. "Invaluable to the police. Some of us have received credit for arrests which would have been impossible without Doktor Wanluster's amazing chemical analyses."

Ixell sighed and smiled: "The war against crime today requires an expert knowledge of all the arts and sciences . . . especially the war against *kings* of crime, Inspektor . . ."

By midnight the von Zoon ball had attained a plane of jollity in which no apprehension of any sort was discernible. Palpably every guest had scoffed at newspaper warnings; for, though most of the dancers wore glittering jewels, no one evinced the faintest trace of nervousness.

Barron Ixell sat in a cozy alcove with Colonel Thayer and the huge Inspektor Kelmann. From their position they could gaze out upon the surging, endless motion of the dancers; and the music seeped into their nook, bringing a rhythmic undertone to their conversation.

They were smoking excellent cigars — the aromatic Havana blend which, Colonel Minford Thayer declared, stamped their host as a connoisseur of tobacco and promised delight to all his visitors. "Moreover, he is the only man in Berlin who will serve you real American coffee," the colonel added. "And that alone makes this house an oasis for us expatriates."

He was about to expand upon this theme when, the cigar swung half way through a gesture, he checked himself; and an expression of utter amazement sprang to his features.

For it was then, unexpectedly, that the keynote of Barron Ixell's amazing Berlin case was sounded.

An appalled cry in a man's hoarse voice rang through the ball room ! And it was accompanied by the crash of shattered glass !

For an instant the three men sat rigid. Then Inspektor Kelmann snapped, *"Zum Teufel !"* and actually lunged out of the alcove. But, violently as he precipitated his great figure, he was preceded to the dance floor by the lithe Ixell.

A revolver shot could have exercised no more paralyzing effect upon the crowd. The music had abruptly ceased, in the middle of a bar. No one stirred. There was a constricted hush in the immense room. And every head was tilted upward to gape at one point of the balcony.

Staring at that common focal spot, Ixell saw a butler leaning back against the balustrade and pointing a horrified finger into the door of an antechamber.

He, apparently, was the man who had emitted the hoarse cry of stupefaction. A tray on the floor at his feet explained the crash: in his shocked condition the servant had let half a dozen liqueur glasses fall from his hands.

What had happened in the antechamber it was impossible to see from the dance floor. And so Ixell, with Inspektor Kelmann at his side, unceremoniously

broke through the crowds in a swift rush to the balcony steps.

They were the first to reach the stricken butler. But what they found when they looked into the small door completely halted them.

Stretched on the floor, with his head lolling under a table, lay their host, the Graf von Zoon ! And about him, in deep fauteuils, sprawled the limp, unconscious figures of four ladies and another gentleman — their arms dangling loosely, their eyes shut !

In the first glance Barron Ixell realized that all jewellry had vanished from those six comatose forms.

CHAPTER II

WHO AND HOW?

THE situation was utterly uncanny. Ixell, staring into the brilliantly illumined chamber, instinctively stiffened. He could hear Inspektor Kelmann crush an oath in his throat.

If at first the criminologist had feared that at least some of those six figures were dead, he was reassured when he stepped into the anteroom. All of them breathed. A few manifested twitchings of fingers; one lady softly moaned — an eerie sound issuing, it seemed, from a dream.

But all were unconscious. Inspektor Kelmann pointed to a tray on the table on which stood six tiny, dainty, porcelain coffee cups — empty.

"Drugged!" he muttered.

By this time the balcony was filled with guests who had stampeded up the stairs. People were beginning to surge into the room, each one adding a gasp to the confusion when he viewed the six listless forms.

Inspektor Kelmann promptly stepped to the door and, like some determined Colossus, blocked it with his tremendous body. In German he cried authoritatively, "No one is to come in! Move down those

steps, please, before this balcony collapses !" It was a ridiculous threat, of course, but the panicky throng intuitively responded to it. Pressure eased away from the door of the antechamber.

"We want a doctor !" Kelmann called. He was quite magnificent as he stood there, commanding the crowd. Something in his resonant voice, in his stature, in his whole personality, compelled obedience.

And behind him, Barron Ixell peered quickly around the room.

It was small. Its single window, giving upon the darkness of the gardens, swung far open, allowing the cold night air to sweep in upon him. In the wind two immense potted palms swayed, their roots buried in gigantic and ornate pots. They filled the corners of the chamber, these plants, and offered an almost romantic background to the weird drama they had witnessed.

Opposite the balcony entrance was another door. As Ixell approached it, Kelmann informed him,

"That leads down to the side of the house. I have a man stationed at the bottom !"

Fortuitously the Inspektor was relieved by two detectives who had managed to push their way to his side. Leaving them to guard the chamber against intrusion, while a physician was being recruited from the guests, he followed Ixell through the second door.

It opened upon a landing from which thickly carpeted steps fell away through a well lighted but narrow corridor.

"My man should be at the bottom," Kelmann said. He raised his voice to call: "Kroz !"

There was no answer.

Immediately Ixell rushed down, with the Inspektor at his back. At the bottom, near the door which led out into the grounds, they found Detective Kroz sprawling crazily across the carpet, as unconscious as the six people in the ante-chamber !

The investigators glanced at each other once — grimly. They did not speak. Both realized that they were confronting a criminal power of inestimable cunning.

They carried the limp body of Detective Kroz to the little anteroom where a physician — Doktor Varadoff, a Russian guest — was already bending over the others.

The Gräfin von Zoon, too, had entered. She stood pallid, her eyes first on her unconscious husband, then on those who had been stricken with him. And though her lips trembled, she could not speak.

Barron Ixell touched Kelmann's arm. "Suppose," he whispered, "you have them remove these people to bedrooms. It will give us freedom to look around."

It was a step the Inspektor had already decided to take. He nodded and himself superintended the carrying of the senseless victims to other chambers in the extensive von Zoon residence. An awed silence pervaded the ball room as each figure was borne across its width — a silence such as might have hovered over a tragedy.

When finally Kelmann returned to the antechamber

in which the strange crime had been committed, he found Barron Ixell peering intently at something he held in his palm. Another detective, too, was eying the curious thing.

Its precise nature was difficult to determine. It was merely a curved segment of what might have been celluloid — a little white strip no larger than a finger-nail, as thin and brittle as egg-shell.

"And what is that ?" asked Kelmann, frowning in perplexity.

Barron Ixell looked up at him. "I'm not sure, Inspektor," he said quietly, "but it suggests several novel possibilities."

"Where did you get it ?"

"It lay at the bottom of the corridor, where we picked up Detective Kroz. His body must have hidden it the first time we descended. At a guess, I should call it some sort of specially treated celluloid."

"Celluloid !" repeated Kelmann slowly.

"I have an idea," said Ixell, "that it was responsible for Kroz's unconsciousness. A chemical test upon it might reveal something of significance."

Haupt-Inspektor Kelmann, averring he would subject it to an examination at the *Ministerium,* carefully deposited the strip in his wallet. Frowning about the room, he mumbled,

"It is the first object in the nature of a possible clue that these 'unconscious victim' robberies have yielded." He paused, his eyes lingering on the coffee cups. "H'm," he added cryptically, "I suppose my theory of

drugged coffee is destroyed. Kroz certainly did not come up to drink coffee with these ladies and gentlemen — "

"And yet," Ixell suggested, "a servant might have brought a cup of coffee to him. Still, I'm inclined to agree with you, Inspektor. I don't believe the coffee is drugged."

Kelmann sniffed at the cups dubiously. "Nevertheless," he determined, "I'll take the leavings in them for a chemical test !"

Of a sudden, he faced Ixell grimly. "I have just made a list of the jewels which were stolen: rings, necklaces, bracelets, and brooches. Each of the four ladies lost something of value. Frau Graubart sustained the most serious loss, a necklace of pearls. The two gentlemen suffered less, of course. Graf von Zoon was robbed of a diamond ring, while Herr Graubart lost nothing, as far as I can learn."

"Surely they haven't given you that information themselves ?" Ixell queried in surprise. "Have any recovered ?"

"Oh, no, not yet. I secured the list from their friends. It is only tentative."

Kelmann stared about at the open window, at the palm fronds graciously curtsying to him. After a moment of thought, he said:

"According to a first consideration of things, the person who drugged and robbed these six people began by eliminating Kroz from his path. Then he mounted these back stairs, performed his task, and descended that way. He even shut the balcony door

to conceal himself from the dancers below. The butler who discovered the situation told me the door was closed when he came with the liqueurs. He had to open it." The Inspektor paused. "But what I am wondering, Herr Ixell, is this: if the thief used the stairs, why did he have to open this window ?"

While Kelmann talked, Barron Ixell was himself examining the window minutely. It was inconceivable that the half dozen people who had retired to this chamber for coffee and liqueurs had themselves opened an avenue for the freezing night wind. If, then, the person — or persons — guilty of the uncanny jewel robbery had done it, fingerprints of incalculable value might be found on the window lock.

This he mentioned, and Inspektor Kelmann promised to institute a personal examination.

"But," he added, "I should like first to search the grounds downstairs. It rained this morning, and the earth is doubtless soggy. If the thief came in or went out through that side door, he must have left tracks ! Will you come down with me, Herr Ixell ?"

"It's futile," the criminologist replied, smiling wryly. "While you were having the people moved to the bedrooms, I glanced over the ground myself. There are no marks."

"No marks !" Kelmann seemed disappointed more than surprised.

"Not a trace of any, except those made by Kroz when he came to the door. Moreover, there are no marks of any kind — either of feet or ladder — under the window."

The Inspektor stared. *"Zum Teufel!"* he muttered softly. "Herr Ixell, if no one came in or went out, it was — " His immense countenance hardened sternly. "It was *an inside job!*"

"Exactly what I believe," calmly replied Barron Ixell. "This entire affair is an inside job."

"But Detective Kroz — "

" — was rendered unconscious in an effort to make the thing resemble an outside job," the criminologist interrupted. "At any rate, that is my opinion. Anyone clever enough to concoct this scheme would have thought of such a precaution."

Perhaps Inspektor Kelmann would have relieved himself of another quiet ejaculation had not one of the servants — the same butler who had disrupted the peace of the evening with his cry — appeared at the door. He was still visibly shaken.

"Bitte," he said. "The Gräfin von Zoon requests the presence of the Herr Inspektor. Two of the ladies have recovered consciousness."

When the butler had departed, the official prophesied, "These women will have nothing to tell me, but we shall see. Will you come along, Herr Ixell ?"

The American, however, slowly shook his head. "If you don't mind," he murmured thoughtfully, "I should prefer to look over this room a little more carefully."

He was left alone, save for the presence of a silent, frowning detective who busied himself in scanning the window frame.

Ixell, stirred by that excitement he invariably experi-

enced when plunging into mystery, stood in the centre of the chamber and allowed his keen gaze to roam about. That gaze was like a searchlight's beam making a slow circle of the skies. It wandered here, there, everywhere. It inspected the fauteuils, the table, the floor, the nodding palms. For fully five minutes it yielded nothing of satisfactory interest.

Yet Ixell continued to peer about the room, until even the detective at the window turned to watch the American criminologist in wonder. He did not move from his central position. Like a pivot to his survey he turned slowly, again and again, covering the same ground a dozen times.

Then, finally, a queer glow leaped into his eyes. They narrowed.

He advanced to the table on which stood the tray with its six porcelain coffee cups. Each cup nestled in an exquisitely designed little saucer. And each saucer held a small, silver spoon.

One of these spoons he lifted in the folds of a silk handkerchief, holding it gingerly between thumb and index finger. He regarded it intently. What had caught his attention was a slight, dark fleck adhering to its under surface.

"What is it?" the detective at his side asked curiously.

"Dirt," answered Ixell. "Merely dirt —"

He wrapped the odd trophy in the silk, slipped it into a pocket.

And then he was startled by the jinnee-like reappearance of the pale butler who came as if the spoon

had been an unwittingly rubbed Alladin's lamp. Inspektor Kelmann, he reported, requested the presence of Herr Ixell in one of the chambers where a lady had recovered sufficiently to speak.

"Tell the Inspektor I shall be there in five minutes," Ixell directed.

As soon as the butler was gone, the door of the antechamber was closed — and locked.

Five minutes later Barron Ixell, his long features queerly taut and grave, was admitted to a room in which Frau Graubart moaned in bed, mechanically imbibing something Doktor Varadoff, the Russian physician, forced between her lips. Kelmann, too, was there, frowning and awaiting the opportunity to commence his inquisition.

When Ixell came, the Inspektor turned to speak. But he must at once have noticed the strange, new lustre in the criminologist's eyes, the warmth of excitement manifest behind his impassivity, for his lips were suddenly clamped in a straight slash.

An instant he hesitated, puzzled. Then he drew the American off to a corner where his low voice would be unheard even by the doctor.

"You have found something else ?" he whispered quickly.

Ixell did not answer. His right hand was sunk deep in his trouser pocket. Now he extracted it — merely an inch or two — and significantly nodded toward it.

Inspektor Kelmann glanced down — and experienced the tingle of a veritable electric current that

rippled through him. His eyes widened, but he uttered no sound.

In Barron Ixell's half hidden palm and tucked within the folds of a handkerchief, the Inspektor saw the hard glitter of diamonds, the soft loveliness of a jumbled string of pearls, the sheen of brilliant platinum! . . .

And he realized that somehow this quiet American had recovered the recently stolen gems!

CHAPTER III

RENDEZVOUS

HAUPT-INSPEKTOR OTTO KELMANN was a man of acknowledged shrewdness, of perspicacity; the sort of man who could catch a whole message swiftly and accurately from a glance, a word, a gesture. Looking at Barron Ixell now, he comprehended that the American desired his discovery to remain a secret. And so Kelmann, though he yearned to learn the details of the amazing retrieval, said nothing. He turned back to the physician and Frau Graubart blandly — the efficient police machine ready to gather data.

Frau Graubart's testimony was discouragingly meagre. A stout, yellow-haired woman in a salmon-tinted gown she should never have affected, she lay panting on the bed and told them, in German:

"I don't know *what* it was ! We were just sitting there, talking. Nothing happened. Nothing at all. Except that I suddenly began to feel a little dizzy and very sleepy — the feeling you have when you drink too much. I knew I was dozing off. I tried to remain awake, but I simply couldn't. The room began to swim around me. I saw the others dimly, like

shadows, swaying and swaying. And that's all! It was like falling asleep, like fainting easily — "

"Did you know whether anyone came into the antechamber while you were — falling asleep ?" Kelmann asked.

"No, I didn't know anything. I don't think anyone came."

"Had anyone entered just before the strange sensation struck you ?"

"No, not since the butler brought us coffee," Frau Graubart asserted after some consideration.

"Did you feel your jewels being taken from you ?"

"Of course not !"

Kelmann thoughtfully rubbed his scarred cheek. Then: "While you were having coffee, the window was not open, was it ?"

"Himmel, no ! Outside it is freezing !"

And now Barron Ixell ventured a query of his own: "Frau Graubart, just before the sensation of sleepiness came over you, did you *smell* anything in the room ?"

She stared at him a moment. Finally she said, "No — not that I can remember."

More satisfactory aid the stout lady could not proffer. As Inspektor Kelmann and Ixell turned away from the bed, accompanied now by Doktor Varadoff who had cautioned the woman to rest a while, the official declared:

"The same story over and over again ! This makes the eighth crime committed in the same strange manner during the past few months ! People have been

overcome in their homes; when stepping into their automobiles. And never an explanation — never any help at all from the victims !"

The Russian physician, a saturnine gentleman who glowered earnestly through his pince-nez, muttered, "I have never experienced a similar case before — never."

"Nor," added Inspektor Kelmann grimly, "has the *Polizei-Ministerium.*" Eager to learn the manner in which the vanished jewels had been found, he caught Barron Ixell's arm as soon as they were in the corridor. "Will you come down to examine the grounds with me ?"

The American nodded. It was, he realized, merely a ruse to secure privacy.

Two minutes later, while an icy night wind plunged through trees to sweep against them hungrily, the criminal investigators walked through the von Zoon gardens. Both were bundled in their overcoats, collars snugly turned up, hands in pockets. And when they spoke, each word produced a little cloudlet which the avid wind immediately whisked away.

"Also !" urged Kelmann. "Where did you find them ?"

"Buried in the palm pots," said Ixell.

"The palm pots !" A second the Inspektor stared over his shoulder at the aquiline profile of his companion. *"Donnerwetter,* and what made you look in the palm pots, Herr Ixell ?"

"One of the coffee spoons was flecked with dirt — ordinary earth. No one, of course, would have used

it in that condition. Consequently, the dirt came upon it after its user had finished his — or her — coffee. And the only place in the ante-chamber from which dirt could have been gathered was — the palm pots."

Ixell was speaking rapidly, in almost a whisper. They had completed a circuit of the dazzlingly illuminated house — one of the imposing residences in Berlin's most impressive suburb, Grunewald — and began a second round.

"So," muttered Kelmann, "you wondered why anyone should have employed a spoon to dig in the palm pots. You investigated, dug yourself, and came upon — h'm — buried treasure, we might say."

"Precisely. Also, I came upon another prop to our theory that it was an inside job. It now seems that the thief, instead of taking the jewels, rid himself of them immediately. Doubtless he did not care to risk any examination of the guests — "

"He was right in that precaution," the Inspektor drily interposed. "I asked the Gräfin von Zoon to allow no one to depart until — well, until it seemed wise."

"And our thief," Ixell went on, "probably is planning to come back for his trophies when the road stands clear !" Of a sudden the American halted in the light of a window. The broad, golden beam splashed over him, threw his shadow far. He groped in an inner pocket and produced a wallet. "I found something else with the jewels — something, Inspektor, that may clear away much of the haze surrounding the method of the crime !"

From his wallet Barron Ixell withdrew a small, square strip of what appeared to be ordinary gauze. It was no larger than the palm of his hand.

In wonder the official mumbled, "That lay with the gems ?"

"Under them. Smell it."

He lifted the gauze to the Inspektor's nose, and Kelmann promptly jerked his head back with a distasteful grimace and an "Oof !"

"It has the odor of an operating room !"

"Rather," amended Ixell, "the odor of an operating *mask !"* He tendered the gauze to Kelmann, and the wind screamed to tear it out of his fingers. His coat was flapping about his knees noisily, yet he appeared totally unaware of the cold, of the discomfort, of anything save the ever intensified interest of this intriguing case.

"Inspektor, have that put to a chemical test together with the piece of celluloid we found, and I'll wager this strip is nothing more than an amateurishly contrived operating mask — or perhaps 'devilishly contrived' is a better descriptive."

As he transferred the gauze to his own wallet, Kelmann eyed Barron Ixell in a strange, narrow way. His gaze probed, pierced, quested, as if struggling to reach the thoughts behind the wind-blown features.

"You have a theory," Inspektor Kelmann declared abruptly, almost as if he were launching an accusation

Ixell smiled at the tone.

"My theory ? Inspektor, it is simple — possibly

wrong. But in view of all we have discovered, I believe the six people in the antechamber and Detective Kroz were overcome by gas."

Kelmann was deeply impressed but not astonished. He frowned at the ground, where the shadows frolicked whenever someone passed the illumined window behind them.

"Gas — yes, yes. Gas — " he muttered.

"An odorless, imperceptible, and quickly effective gas which deadens the senses without killing. The person who administered it pressed this gauze, probably within a handkerchief, to his own mouth and nose, thus avoiding the effect for himself. Unable to rid himself of it in any other way at the moment, he buried it with his loot. He had, you see, already opened the window, allowing the gas to escape after it had done its work upon the others."

"But *how* was it administered ?"

"Shall we, for the sake of a possible basis, say that the piece of celluloid we discovered was part of a little — gas bomb ?"

"Zum Teufel !" Kelmann stared. "I believe you have struck it ! He threw the bomb into the room, entered after it had exercised its effect upon those six, and — "

He stopped. A long, lean shadow had fallen across his own. Instinctively he whirled around, and Barron Ixell followed his gaze.

The window framed the round-shouldered figure of the chemist, Doktor Gustave Wanluster. His back was turned to them, and he was chatting, it seemed,

with Colonel Minford Thayer and with two ladies. His wife was beside him — her dark beauty vividly arresting, forming a thrilling picture in the oblong of the window.

"I'll have the doktor examine the gauze and the celluloid," Kelmann decided: "Tomorrow !"

"Also," said Ixell, "you had better take the spoon from me. Your fingerprint men may find something of value when they study it."

Kelmann accepted the silver spoon with hands that were quite gentle. He did not remove it from Ixell's silk handkerchief but thrust the entire valuable bundle into his pocket.

Then, his great hand within the American's arm, he started another circuit of the splendid von Zoon home.

"Now," he said, "about those jewels. I understand your plan, Herr Ixell. It is perfect. We shall keep your discovery secret, of course. And eventually, probably when the crowd has left, the thief will return to the palm pots, at which time we will be there to receive him. So ?"

"Exactly," Ixell admitted, smiling as he nodded.

"You will join me in the vigil ?"

The American criminologist had already proceeded so far in the case that the Inspektor's invitation was quite superfluous.

They agreed, therefore, to meet when the other guests had departed, that they might together watch the von Zoon dwelling for the reappearance of the thief to whom Kelmann facetiously referred again as "The King of Crime."

If one considered the eight amazing exploits of the jewel purloiner, the title was not wholly inept. For, until this night, there had never been a single clue, never the faintest hint of any explanation. Truly, the man had been an undeposed king in his profession.

Inspektor Kelmann paused.

"And what are we to do with the jewels?" he asked. "If we return them now, our scheme collapses."

"Why return them tonight?"

"But, really, to keep them would seem —"

"You are an officer of the law, Inspektor," said Ixell crisply. "Take them. Turn them in at the *Ministerium,* and let the law attend to them. And of course, you can't turn them in until tomorrow."

A moment Kelmann hesitated, then conceded with a grin. When they entered the warm foyer of the house once more, he was in possession of the vanished gems.

Immediately one of the detectives accosted them.

"The Gräfin von Zoon," he reported, "wishes to see you, Inspektor. Something queer seems to have occurred."

They glanced at each other, then hurried upstairs. Their Valkyrian hostess, they discovered, was seated at her husband's bedside. A dozen people were in the chamber, including Doktor Varadoff. On the bed lay Graf von Zoon, his senses regained but his cheeks still as pallid and sickly in hue as the expanse of his bald head. He eyed them glassily when they entered.

"The Graf has something to tell us ?" Inspektor Kelmann asked quickly.

But his eagerness suffered immediate disappointment.

"No," answered the Gräfin von Zoon, "he knows only what the others have already told. It isn't that, Herr Inspektor. I summoned you because I thought you would be interested to know a small and incomprehensible thing the butler has just reported."

"Yes — ?"

"The person who stole our guests' jewels also stole one of our spoons !"

CHAPTER IV

THE ADVENTURE OF A SPOON

THE collapse of the German mark immediately after the World War and the simultaneous revolution of the German populace did much to shatter the ranks, prestige, and wealth of the ancient Prussian aristocracy. When Kaiser Wilhelm departed from Berlin for his exile in Holland, he took with him much of the glamour that had once enshrouded the nobility.

Germany today contains innumerable titles whose possessors are quite destitute; ladies and gentlemen who would probably exchange their social lustre for a tenth of the money which once was theirs. Most of them have been compelled to relinquish their erstwhile villas and *schlosses*. Even Potsdam — the Potsdam that attempted to emulate the Fontainebleau of old France and perished in the effort — is replete with magnificent homes that "used to belong to — "

But a few of the former nobility, principally those who had invested their funds in real estate, had flooded them into foreign industries, or had otherwise succeeded in transferring currency into solid property, managed to keep their heads above the devastating tidal wave that destroyed most of the old nobles.

Among those fortunate ones was the Gräfin Henrietta von Zoon.

To her, wealth had descended from her first husband, killed in the war. And she had preserved it even in the panic and frenzy of revolution. Intimate friends of the family declared that the noblewoman had, by the exercise of staunch common sense and business acumen, saved herself and her present husband from veritable penury.

Whatever the truth might be, she was wealthy. The ball she gave on that particular December night cost enough to maintain some families in comfort for months. And the Gräfin was distressed beyond expression by the calamity which had risen to ruin the affair.

Indeed, she did her utmost to restore a semblance of cheer to the assemblage. Having left her husband to sleep off the after effects of his unpleasant experience, having assured the comfort of the other victims of "The King of Crime," she hastened down to the dance floor and urged the orchestra into the gayest and maddest of fox trots.

A few of the more ardent guests did, indeed, dance again. Yet most of the people gathered in whispering, nervous cliques which even the Gräfin von Zoon could not break, and they discussed the appalling robbery incessantly. Would it be the last night ? Would "The King of Crime," as a paper had named the enigmatic criminal, essay another coup? . . .

A few of the ladies disappeared for a time and then returned without jewels sparkling upon their persons.

"Instead of stuffing them into their bosoms now," Inspektor Kelmann declared with some disgust, "they should not have worn them tonight! The newspapers may have been loud and sensational but certainly they issued warnings!"

In an alcove that formed a corner of the ball room, Barron Ixell — his brown hair as smooth as ever, his evening clothes immaculate — sat with Colonel Minford Thayer, Doktor Gustave Wanluster, and the chemist's fascinating wife. The gentlemen were smoking their host's splendid Havanas, and Frau Wanluster puffed thoughtfully upon a gold tipped cigarette.

"That Doktor Varadoff," the colonel was saying, "is the most baffling man I've met in ages. He was rather a famous physician in Russia, I understand. But unhappily he had royalist ideas at a time when Bolshevism was mandatory. I am told he spent months in prison and was finally released as a reward for a delicate and successful operation he had performed upon his warden."

"We are fortunate in having had him here tonight," said Doktor Wanluster in German. "He aided those people immeasurably."

"He knows his business," flatly affirmed Colonel Thayer.

Barron Ixell, eying the ashes of his cigar, inquired, "Does he practise here in Berlin?"

"He doesn't practise at all. He's engaged in writing a book on the Russian revolution, from what I've been able to gather. He talks so little himself that one can't be certain of anything. He — "

The colonel abruptly stopped, and all three men rose as Gräfin von Zoon interrupted their seclusion. Because she found them sombre in expression, she fancied the happenings of the night had sapped their spirits; so the good hostess joined their group and struggled valiantly to infuse them with renewed animation.

But all her endeavors could not forfend the untimely dispersal of her guests. Inspektor Kelmann had lifted his ban on their departures, and by two o'clock — an hour when the ball should have attained its climax of vivacity — half the company had already left; the rest were going in as rapid succession as decency permitted.

The Gräfin von Zoon found herself as impotent as she had been against the German democratic uprising. At two her husband descended, still pale yet striving to be jovial, and threw the weight of his personal charm against the leave-taking of the crowd. Laughing, his monocle jauntily adjusted, he wandered about assuring everyone that no serious effects had resulted from the recent comas. But the dullness of his eyes and the droop of his jaws indicated that he still felt rather sickly and that his merriment was merely a mask over profound dismay. Someone whispered that the diamond ring which had been stolen from him was valuable not only intrinsically but because it had been the gift of a Hohenzollern.

At a quarter of three the last dozen guests left, and among them were Ixell and Colonel Thayer, at whose home he was stopping.

As they rolled off in the colonel's car, the criminolo-

gist said, "I'll have to trouble you to drop me at the corner of Bismarck Platz and Handel Strasse, if you don't mind."

The silver-haired attaché stared in surprise. "Drop you ? What for ?"

Ixell decided to be candid. "I'm to meet Inspektor Kelmann. I don't suppose I'll be able to rejoin you before breakfast, colonel."

A moment the military man sat silent. Then: "So you and Kelmann are working together on this case, eh ?"

"In a way; but I'm really nothing more than an observer."

"I might have expected it," said Colonel Thayer, chuckling. "Keeping you out of criminal mysteries is as hopeless as — "

" — as getting me to bed tonight. Bismarck Platz, yes."

The colonel had bent forward to tap a signal to his chauffeur. As he turned back, he inquired, "I don't suppose you are free to tell me if this case has offered any clues?"

The car stopped at the curb before Ixell replied. He stepped out, turned up his collar, and said, "I hope, colonel, I'll be free to tell you everything — tomorrow. Good night !"

"Good luck ! And if you *do* find your 'King of Crime,' remember that Germany is no longer any place for kings !"

Barron Ixell moved to the corner Kelmann had designated for their meeting — a corner within sight

of the von Zoon home; but the Inspektor was not there.

An eerie, cutting wind blew out of the night. The American huddled in whatever shelter a tree-trunk yielded, his hands deep in his pockets. About him the trees of Grunewald moaned like beggars wailing for alms and stretched crooked, pleading arms over the sidewalks.

He waited with as much patience as the cold permitted. The plan he and the Inspektor had discussed was to return to the von Zoon residence as soon as it was darkened. Kelmann had promised to take the key of the little side door that communicated with the antechamber in which the cunning robbery had been committed. "We can be inside or out, as it suits us," he had said.

Ixell presently began to peer about sharply. Where was the Inspektor ? Already the lights were being extinguished in the von Zoon house. To wait here, in the driving wind, was far from pleasant. Occasionally a shiver coursed through him, and his ear lobes pained.

He was standing at the corner of an estate around which loomed a shoulder-high hedge. Along the streets huge, ancient trees maintained a ghoulish guard. He saw no one — not even a chance policeman.

After a time he began to stride back and forth, rubbing his hands and frowning. But of the Inspektor there was still no sign. He looked at his watch; it was after three. In increasing perplexity — and concern — he resumed his pacing. The von Zoon win-

dows, with a few desultory exceptions, were dark.

And then, as he passed a gate in the high hedge, he distinguished a sound that brought him to a sudden, tense halt, that sent a new sort of shiver through him.

It was a low, pained moan — and not the moan of a tree.

Impulsively Ixell sprang to the gate. It crashed open before the violence of his push. He peered around, his narrowed eyes piercing the blackness behind the hedge. And abruptly those eyes grew wide.

What he spied, in the dense shadows of the naked shrubbery, was the sprawling figure of a man. It stirred a little, groaned, moved an arm.

And the man was Haupt-Inspektor Otto Kelmann! . . .

Ixell, uttering an expletive, dragged the tremendous bulk out of the shadows. At the gate, the luminosity of a lamp post splashed over the official's great countenance. His eyes were shut in pain. His lips trembled. That ancient scar in his cheek had become purplish, but it was no longer alone.

For on Kelmann's left temple rose an ugly, bleeding welt.

He opened his eyes dazedly and looked upon Barron Ixell without immediate recognition. For a while, as the American applied a handkerchief to the bruise, Kelmann did not stir.

Then, with sudden jerkiness of motion, he dipped a hand into an inner pocket. Whatever astounding discovery he made affected him like a drastic stimulant. He sat up at once, wide-eyed and in agitation. Again

he stared at Ixell; and knew him. That abrupt excitement set Kelmann's entire body to quivering. He gripped Barron Ixell's wrist, squeezed it mightily. His stare was full of consternation, as if he had entirely forgotten his pain in the forcefulness of a new affliction.

And his first dumbfounded word, issuing in a choked whisper, was:

"Gone !"

Ixell's own eyes were flaming now.

"The jewels ?" he demanded.

"And the spoon !"

CHAPTER V

RED CLAY

MANY agonizing minutes passed before Inspektor Kelmann was able to stand steadily. But during that time a patrolman passed a distant corner, and Ixell hailed him. The uniformed man came running. And when he recognized the tremendous figure of Berlin's premier detective, he gasped quite audibly.

"Get us a taxicab!" Ixell ordered. "Anything!"

A moment the policeman hesitated; then, at a painful nod from Kelmann, he saluted and raced off — though where he intended to find a cab at this hour in Grünewald the man himself probably did not know.

Ixell peered back at the Inspektor. He was leaning dizzily, heavily, against the iron gate, his chin on his chest. He looked, oddly, very old then. The resemblance to von Hindenburg was more marked than ever.

"Do you feel as if you can talk yet?" the American inquired softly. His own handkerchief was bound about Kelmann's wounded head.

"I think so — "

"Can you remember what happened?"

"I — never knew what happened. I was walking up and down, waiting for you — "

"Yes — ?" Ixell urged the man gently, for Kelmann was talking in a low, difficult tone that indicated all too plainly the pain he still suffered. About them the night wind tore icily, tormenting the naked branches until they moaned for respite.

"I didn't see anyone. Not a soul. Then I — passed this gate. I heard a sound — as if something brushed against the hedge. I started to look around. But before I could turn — something crashed against my head — something hard, like iron — That's all I know."

There was a pitiful quality in that rugged voice now. It was accustomed to dominate; instead it was merely relating, struggling not to become a whimper.

Barron Ixell began to examine the ground. He had no flashlight, however, and he learned that Kelmann, himself in evening clothes, had not taken one. In the hope of striking some footsteps, he lit matches within the shelter of his overcoat and squinted about for several minutes.

There was none.

"This ground is full of pebbles," he muttered. "Too hard, too hard." He left the Inspektor at the gate and instituted a more thorough search; but the ground offered no clue to the identity of Kelmann's assailant.

Finally, in resignation, he returned to his companion in this weirdly astonishing quest of the "King of Crime." The inspektor felt slightly better, having re-invigorated himself with long draughts of the wintry wind. He stood erect, adjusting his bandages more securely.

"Zum Teufel!" he was mumbling. "Now how in the name of thunder did anyone know I had those jewels? And why was the spoon taken?"

"I think we can answer both questions," said Ixell, somewhat grimly.

"Ja? Well, maybe my head is still too addled to see. Frankly, Herr Ixell, I'm bewildered."

The criminologist enlightened him quietly. "If you remember, the butler gave out the report of the missing spoon. It was circulated among all the guests. Everyone spoke of it."

"But," protested Kelmann. "I didn't tell anybody it was in *my* possession! When the Gräfin questioned me, I pretended surprise."

"Of course. But you must, Inspektor, grant a certain amount of deductive ingenuity to the person we are seeking."

"You think he *guessed?"*

"Deduced. Yes, he deduced it. We are fighting an extremely clever thief. Every one of his exploits is quite remarkable, the more I consider them. The man — since we have agreed that it was an inside job — knew the spoon was missing. He realized that *he* hadn't taken it. He realized, also, that he might have left his fingerprints on it. And so he confronted the absolute necessity of retrieving it before it went to the fingerprint experts." Ixell smiled drily. "And he did."

Inspektor Kelmann pondered upon the words, then shook his head. "How," he demanded, "did he know *I* had it?"

"He didn't know — he relied on deduction. If you

were in his place, Inspektor, and learned that something of an incriminating nature had vanished, where would you imagine it to be ?"

"*Ja,* I understand. In the hands of the police, very likely."

"Exactly. And if so, then in the hands of the *chief* of the police. That's you, in this case. Probably the thief didn't know how we came to suspect that spoon, but it was enough for him to know that we had suspected it — that it was gone. He found it imperative to get it back. So he watched you, followed you tonight, until his opportunity came. Or else, if he had an accomplice, he caused someone else to watch you. When you began to parade along that hedge, the chance was presented. And it was taken."

"*Donnerwetter !*" muttered Inspektor Kelmann. "You reason more sharply than I do, Herr Ixell. But I believe you are right. And the jewels ? You think they were an incidental discovery on my person ?"

"Probably."

"Then — " Kelmann groaned in disappointment, "it's useless to watch that antechamber ! The thief won't return !"

"Quite useless, I fancy," Ixell confessed.

The Inspektor snorted in disgust. "He's more clever than we are, whoever he is ! He took our chance of triumph and twisted it into a taunting welt on my head ! Now we have nothing !"

"You still have your wallet ? With the celluloid and gauze ?"

With a start, Kelmann searched. Yes, those clues

still retained. His wallet had not been touched. "At least," he sighed, a little helplessly, "we may still, with Doktor Wanluster's analysis to aid us, determine exactly how the thing was done — we can verify what we have already guessed."

Of a sudden they heard the purr of an automobile motor, and a moment later a taxicab, with the policeman on its running board, swung around the corner.

As it approached the curb, its headlights sent golden shafts plunging against the iron gate. Kelmann started toward the car, but Barron Ixell abruptly dropped to his knees.

To the Inspektor's astonishment, he exclaimed in a low, keenly vibrant tone:

"Stop that cab where it is ! Have its headlights play this way !"

Within a few seconds a golden glare brilliantly illumined the grilled gate. And Ixell was peering at an iron bar that crossed its bottom.

On that bar hung a clump of reddish dirt, perhaps a quarter of an inch thick and two inches in width. It was the sort of refuse a shoe might leave if its sole were brushed over the iron.

"What do you make of it ?" murmured Kelmann who had stooped at Ixell's side.

"It's *red* clay."

"I see. But — you think it was left by the man who struck me ?"

"You were attacked on the sidewalk," said Ixell, speaking rapidly and with confidence, as he stared at the Inspektor. "You are much too heavy to have been

lifted over the hedge. You were, therefore, dragged through the gate. This looks as if the man who dragged you into concealment had both his arms busy in holding you, and so he pushed the gate open with his foot !"

"H'm — " Kelmann rubbed a speculative hand across his cheek. "H'm, yes" — he admitted. "Yes — and the clay is red."

"What is the color of the soil in Berlin ? Red ?"

"Well, n-o. Mostly black, I believe. Yes, of course, black."

"Do you know of any region in or near Berlin where the earth is red ?" Ixell asked quickly.

Kelmann considered. "No," he said at last, slowly. "I don't."

The criminologist nodded. He was already scraping the reddish sediment into a strip of paper he had snatched out of a pocket.

"We have lost our original clues," he said as he worked, "but we have found a substitute that may prove exceedingly satisfactory ! All right, there. Bring the cab to the curb !"

Before they drove away, however, Inspektor Kelmann leaned out of the door to inquire of the patrolman, "Whose house is this ?"

The man answered, "It has been unoccupied since September."

"Also," said Kelmann as he sank back in the seat, heavily, "we have no jewels, we have no spoon, we have no criminal. But we have red clay. . . *Zum Teufel,* what a night !"

CHAPTER VI

ZEEBURG

TO the born criminal investigator — and if ever a man was born to the profession, it was Barron Ixell — the scent of mystery is as irresistible as the lure of the sea to the old salt. And so it was that the American criminologist, who had come to Berlin merely to study the methods of its *Polizei-Ministerium* and who was in no manner directly connected with its police, plunged headlong into the intriguing case of "The King of Crime."

In many aspects it was an extraordinary puzzle. Eight times people in possession of jewels — and always people of Berlin's élite — had mysteriously been rendered unconscious and robbed. And in not a single instance could the victims themselves offer any testimony of importance to investigators.

Obviously the unknown perpetrator of these outrages was possessed of a keen and lively intellect. His retrieval of the supposedly incriminating spoon and of the jewels attested to the soundness of his reasoning faculties — and to his ruthlessness.

Ixell respected an intelligent antagonist; brains lent spirit to the fight.

On the day succeeding the ill-fated von Zoon ball, he began his activities early. In its way, it was to be a dreary day; a day of drudgery; but it was to lead to an amazing *dénouement.* And because he had learned, from long and arduous experience, that brilliant achievement is frequently the outcrop of laborious, unthrilling effort, he launched himself into his trying work with ebullient zeal.

After breakfast, his host, Colonel Minford Thayer, aided him in securing a list of Berlin's house builders. Together they drove to the Department of Construction Licenses; and though its chief had not yet arrived, a bit of cajolery induced a clerk to supply the information.

It was half-past nine when Barron Ixell, having left the colonel, started his exhaustive canvass of house constructors.

He enlisted the help of a taxicab chauffeur — whom he employed for the day — to map out an itinerary which would cause as little waste of time as possible. Then he rode off on his trip of inquisition, going from one builder to another.

At each office he strained his German to make the same inquiries: Did the gentlemen know where, in Berlin or its vicinity, the soil was of reddish color ? In digging foundations in or around Berlin, had they ever struck red clay ? . . .

Everywhere he was received with infinite courtesy, greeted and bid adieu with bows of stiff formality. But nowhere, during the morning, did he obtain affirmative results. The soil of Berlin was black. As

far as anyone knew, there was no red clay to be discovered in the city.

Ixell's optimism, however, was not crushed. More than fifty names still remained on his list.

When he paused to take lunch, he telephoned to the *Polizei-Ministerium;* but Inspektor Kelmann, he learned, was at his home, recuperating from the ugly blow he had sustained. Ixell forthwith called the man.

"*Ach!*" Kelmann assured him, deprecatingly in his deep, stirring voice, "it is nothing. I have a little headache and an unpleasant bruise, but that is all. Still my wife and my doctor, they insist that I rest at home. So I am walking about the house like a caged animal and growling like one. I think that soon they'll be so tired of my annoyances that they'll send me off to the *Ministerium.* I expect to be there this afternoon."

"But there is nothing serious?" Ixell asked in relief.

"*Nein, nein.* Nothing, except that I'm bandaged up to look like a turbaned Hindu. But the bandage will come off this afternoon; a strip of gauze and adhesive tape are more comfortable. And — yes, Herr Ixell! Speaking of gauze — "

"You have a report?"

"I heard from Doktor Wanluster a short time ago. I had sent him both the gauze and the celluloid for chemical analyses, you know. His report substantiates what you suspected."

"To what extent?"

"The gauze was treated in the manner of any ordi-

nary operating mask. It would certainly have guarded its user from the effects of the gas that rendered the six people in that room unconscious — if, of course, we are right about the gas. Whoever entered the antechamber, even if it was filled with fumes, was quite safe if he had the gauze pressed to his nostrils and mouth."

"And the celluloid ?" Ixell queried.

"H'm — " Inspektor Kelmann's voice hesitated. "He couldn't tell me much about that — except that it *is* an extremely thin and fragile piece of celluloid. But a chemical test upon it produced no satisfactory results."

Barron Ixell, standing in the telephone booth of a restaurant, frowned a moment; then —

"Inspektor," he asked, "could Doktor Wanluster give you any idea of the gas that might have been employed to obtain such results ? You inquired of him, I suppose — "

"Ye-es, I did, I did." There was a pause. "Doktor Wanluster was not certain. He said that during the war experiments were made with a gas called 'Chloropaxon,' but that it was found too weak for effective war use. It might have been that or something similar, he declared. For 'Chloropaxon' is odorless, invisible, and exercises a swift though not fatal effect. It is being considered for anæsthetic purposes by physicians. But, you understand, the Doktor was not sure."

Ixell had made a note of the word "Chloropaxon" on a slip of paper. As he stared at it, Kelmann called:

"And, yes, Herr Ixell, one other thing! The window in the antechamber — "

"Yes?"

"Last night, before I left the von Zoon house, I examined it thoroughly. Unfortunately, I was so addled after my blow that when I met you I omitted to tell you. But — the window bore no fingerprints!"

At that Ixell smiled wryly. He had scarcely expected happy reports from that quarter. "The King of Crime" seemed too diabolically clever to leave such obvious traces of himself.

"About Doktor Wanluster," he said; "do you think I can consult him today, Inspektor? I should like to learn more about this 'Chloropaxon'."

"Sorry," Kelmann replied, "but the Doktor is leaving Berlin for the day. He told me he expects to spend the night in Dresden. But he'll return tomorrow."

When Ixell sat down to lunch, it was with a mind teeming with a hundred conjectures and possibilities. He sat in a restaurant on Kurfürstendamm — the Broadway of Berlin. Through the window he could see an incessant surge of traffic, a continuous parade of pedestrians, the colorful fronts of innumerable cafés, cabarets, *kinos,* theatres. But he noticed none of these. To him Berlin had become merely a background for a fascinating problem.

After his meal he resumed the canvass of builders. And at half-past four, when he sat in the offices of a rather impressive company on Friedrich-Strasse, he

struck the trail that might conduct him to another discovery in the case.

"Red clay ?" muttered a white-haired gentleman, tapping a pencil on his desk. "Red clay ? We-ell, yes. We did strike it once. We were excavating for a villa on the shores of the Wansee, at Zeeburg, when I noticed that the earth all about the spot was of that peculiar color. H'm, *ja — jawohl.* Red it was. Red clay."

Immediately Ixell's eyes narrowed and shone with new animation. Would it be possible to trace Kelmann's assailant to Zeeburg ?

"Where is the place, precisely ?" he demanded.

"Zeeburg ? *Ach,* it is just one of those little villages that lie along the Wansee between Berlin and Potsdam. Most people usually go there in the summer only. There is a place to bathe and a pleasant *Konditorei* right on the waterfront, where you have music with your coffee — "

"How long would it take me to go there ?"

"By train ? No more than twenty-five minutes. By boat, maybe three quarters of an hour. It is really a suburb of Berlin, I suppose. But you will find it dead at this time of year."

"One more thing," Ixell urged, bending forward. "Can you tell me the name of the people for whom you built that villa ?"

"Certainly. It was a family named Schummer."

Barron Ixell departed from this courteous and willing informant with more glamorous hope than he had known all day. It was almost five o'clock. He dis-

missed the taxi and proceeded at once to a café from which he telephoned to the *Polizei-Ministerium*. Inspektor Kelmann, he learned, had been there and would probably return by six o'clock.

"Have you a list of all the guests who attended the von Zoon ball last night ?" the criminologist snapped, his voice eager and hurried.

"The *Minister* has the list, *jawohl*." It was the *Minister's* secretary speaking, a young man who knew Ixell well as a result of the many calls he had made upon the Department since his arrival in Berlin some two weeks previous to the von Zoon affair.

"Can you learn for me if any of those people live in Zeeburg ?"

"Zeeburg ? It will take some time — "

"I'll telephone you again in half an hour ! Try to get me the information. Thank you !"

That half hour Barron Ixell devoted to a railroad journey to Zeeburg itself.

What the investigation at the *Ministerium* would yield, he could not guess. But should it hint of an avenue of procedure, he wished to be on the ground.

It was dark when he stepped off the train — dark, starless, with a cold, damp wind blowing upon him from the Wansee. He buttoned his overcoat snugly. In its right pocket nestled a small but powerful American automatic pistol. How far the day's inquisitions might lead him he had not, that morning, been able to guess; but preparedness is better than regret, and so he had armed himself in readiness for any unanticipated development.

At once he entered the dingy, yet clean, station and secured a telephone communication with Berlin's *Polizei-Ministerium*. This time he spoke to the *Minister* himself, a gentleman who had from the beginning manifested profound interest in the career and methods of Barron Ixell.

"My secretary," he said in English, "told me what you requested, and we have the information. But it may prove disappointing, Herr Ixell. None of the guests who were at the von Zoon ball lives in Zeeburg!"

"None — " The American, for an instant, appeared dismayed.

But before he could utter another word, the Minister added:

"Still, here is an interesting point, though I doubt its importance. There is an old house in Zeeburg — it stands alone on a hill overlooking the water; quite alone, I understand. And it is the property of the Thalburg family. At any rate, it has descended through the family for several generations and now belongs to the last of the line. You will be surprised to learn that the last of the Thalburgs is the wife of the gentleman you met here — Frau Greta Wanluster."

Ixell's eyes widened.

"It belongs to the wife of Doktor Wanluster — ?" he muttered slowly.

"Exactly, Herr Ixell. But I am given to understand that it has been unused for at least two years. The Wanlusters occasionally went there for the summer, but lately they have been going to Switzerland. I

think, however, that Frau Wanluster keeps a caretaker of some sort at the place. Still, I scarcely see what connection she — "

But Ixell had already interrupted with a hasty phrase of thanks and farewell. He spent a few moments with the station-master, learning the precise location of the old Thalburg home.

Then he emerged into the biting wind, his long countenance taut yet aglow with inner excitement. The property of Frau Greta Wanluster ! . . . Perhaps red clay would prove as helpful as a silver spoon. . .

For an instant, as the wind howled about him in the darkness, Ixell halted and considered summoning Inspektor Kelmann to share his investigations. But the recollection of the official's physical condition discouraged the notion. It would be more charitable to summon him to certainties than to possibilities; and Ixell hoped soon to be certain about several things. Many things !

CHAPTER VII

THE HOUSE

IT brooded on a hilltop, alone, surly, scowling out over the vast blackness of the water. It sat like some old hag who has lost her faith in the world and holds herself aloof, shunning neighbors, steeping herself in the ugliest of gloomy reveries. Over its massive stone walls — walls that bore the weight of centuries, it seemed — barren vines crawled like the tentacles of some sprawling, ungainly beast. It rose to a height of two stories, though a turret at one corner of the flat roof lent it an aspect of greater elevation which was entirely illusory.

About the ancient home of the Thalburgs hung a dismal, sullen silence that was disturbed only by the wind when it moaned a little to the trees around the place. And on this night the splash of the water welled out of the Wansee, as small waves smacked the shore.

In front of the house, Barron Ixell stopped, allowing his questing gaze to roam over it, speculatively. It was far from reassuring; the sort of dwelling about which eerie, incredible legends gather.

The cold wind flapped his coat against his knees.

He was constrained to pull his hat low over his forehead. He saw no lights — save a cluster shimmering far off on the opposite side of the water — for trees blocked his view of Zeeburg at the foot of the hill.

The desolate house seemed not only untenanted but long since abandoned. It had the appearance of a building settling into decay. Yet the *Polizei-Minister* had suggested that it lodged a caretaker.

His hands sunk deep in his pockets, Barron Ixell began to walk around it slowly, at a distance of several yards from the formidable and forbidding walls. It was a careful reconnaissance during which his darting gaze studied the hostilely shuttered windows, the closed doors. Were those doors locked? In a few moments he intended to test them.

As he walked, he was impressed by a peculiar quality of the ground. It was oddly adhesive, as if damp, and clung to his soles in thin layers, lodged more thickly in the angles made by his heels. At the rear of the gloomy house he stopped and bent for a keener inspection of the strange soil. He lit a match in the shelter of his overcoat. And though its yellow flame danced for but a few seconds before it spluttered and died, it revealed something that stamped a shrewd smile about his lips.

"Red clay," he told himself. It was of precisely the same color as the sediment he had the previous night discovered on the iron gate.

After that he approached the house more tensely.

He was wholly determined to enter. What he should find within or whether he should find anything

at all, he could not know. But it was imperative that he follow the clue of the red clay which had already led him to the name of the noted chemist's wife; and now to her property.

All the shutters, apparently, were securely locked. He tried one or two, but found them unyielding to a casual tug.

Beyond the width of a stone veranda loomed the great front door — a ponderous, oaken portal that bore the same invulnerable and aloof aspect as the house itself. He went to it, pressed his weight against it, attempted to manipulate the heavy iron hook that supplanted a knob.

The door, however, was staunch. It emitted not even a creak.

Frowning, Ixell turned away. In his initial survey he had noticed two other entrances, less imposing, one at the side and the other at the rear. These he decided to try before considering the use of force upon the shutters.

The wind, sweeping across the expanse of the Wansee, snarled among the trees, as if seeking to frighten him away. Far across the water the cluster of lights watched him. As he rounded the house, he felt a shuddering sense of solitude — the loneliness that comes of being lost in a bleak, freezing wilderness. For this hilltop, though within a few hundred yards of Zeeburg, had a detached, deserted atmosphere that chilled.

The side door offered no hope of ingress. It was solid, though it shook slightly, and resisted his might-

iest push. When he neared the entrance at the back of the house, he was far from optimistic concerning its possibilities. He tried it gently first, however; merely pressed against it.

The door swung inward with almost uncanny ease!

Ixell stood utterly motionless. In his right pocket his fingers clutched the little automatic, drew it out. He was peering into opaque blackness. And though he waited for his eyes to seize objects, to distinguish a passageway, the task was as difficult as if he were looking into an empty, formless pit.

Here was facile admittance to the house of Frau Greta Wanluster. Here was what he had for several minutes been seeking. And yet, having achieved his first goal, Ixell hesitated.

Behind him the wind suddenly screamed, the trees waved and groaned and creaked. His coat flapped noisily. But in contrast with the silent blackness in the house, the stormy din was almost a delight.

Abruptly he frowned again, chiding himself for unfounded apprehension. After all, he was armed. He was prepared to encounter — anything.

Ixell levelled the automatic and stepped through the door.

Inside, he advanced with extreme caution, thrusting forth each foot to test the ground before firmly planting its toe. He could see nothing. He groped for matches with his left hand; and, striking one, he halted to ascertain his position.

In the flickering yellow glow, as weird as it was helpful, he found himself standing in a long, narrow, and

unfurnished corridor. This he followed to an open door which led him into a great, square chamber. And the chamber, too, was empty. Not even a chair was there.

He began to wonder whether the trail of the red clay would lead only into an unfurnished, deserted house about which his fancy was weaving incongruous and grotesque images. And as he peered about the disappointing room, in whose centre he now stood, the match flame flickered and went out.

He reached for another at once, for the blackness seemed even more intense than before.

And at the very moment his fingers sank into his pocket, he heard something.

Nothing tangible, nothing certain; simply as if a light object — a match, perhaps — had fallen to the floor at his feet. Yet, as he heard it, Ixell experienced an icy ripple that coursed through him. For he remembered, of a sudden, that a small, thin-walled ball of celluloid could not make a loud sound. . .

As the realization struck him, he sprang back in the direction of the door. He could not see it, but he believed he could recall its precise location. He stretched out his arm, searched —

And almost in his face the door was slammed closed!

Ixell hurled himself against it, pushed with all the strength in his body. But strength became a futile thing very quickly. He could feel it oozing out of him as a strange, unreal lethargy seeped into his being.

There was no odor in the room. He breathed with

no difficulty. But his mind was swaying, reeling, and the very darkness seemed to rock gently, dizzily around him.

Ixell shouted something; it issued from him in a faint whisper. What was happening he no longer realized. His legs bent despite him. The blackness crept into him, into his head. He began to sag, both his hands feebly pressed against the door.

He attempted to shoot the automatic, if only to produce some sound of distress. But the gun slipped out of his fingers, which were unable to hold it, and clattered on the wooden floor.

And a moment later Barron Ixell himself crumpled across it — unconscious.

CHAPTER VIII

THE KING'S COURT

WHEN Barron Ixell regained his senses, he lay, for many minutes, in a semi-stupor that forbade even thinking. It was as if his body had recovered more swiftly than his brain — a twilight between wakefulness and coma.

Gradually, however, the drug that had deadened his mind relinquished its paralyzing grip. It slipped away slowly, yet steadily, leaving his perceptions ever more clear. And after a time he was aware, first, of a mild nausea. It made him grimace, lick his dry lips.

But this feeling he quickly ignored when he realized that he was lying on a stone floor, his wrists painfully bound behind him by a rope that reached down to encircle also his ankles.

The discovery, appalling though it was, proved a most effective stimulant to his struggling head. It brought a flood of memory surging to him, reminded him of his peril, and whipped his senses into immediate alertness. He forgot the nausea, forgot everything save the circumstances that had plunged him into this drastic plight.

His immediate concern, he knew, was to find means of freeing himself. Yet the possibility of such a deed seemed woefully and hopelessly remote. He was bound tightly, very efficiently. Though he rolled once or twice, his bonds remained cuttingly intact.

He decided to postpone all effort until the poison of the drug was wholly lost, until he could study his surroundings.

To see now was not as difficult as it had been in the first moments of entering the house. And it was with profound gratification that he distinguished the things about him.

He lay in a low-ceilinged, square room which he judged to be a cellar chamber. Both the floor and the walls were of stone, whose coldness flowed through him in a succession of chills. High on one side was a small, oblong window, no more than six inches in width. Its pane must have been broken, for the wind whistled and hissed through it and sent an icy current circulating around the room.

At the first glance, Ixell knew that the window proffered no chance of escape; even a slim child would have to struggle mightily to squeeze through it. For him it was palpably impossible — though, while he remained bound, everything was impossible.

His eyes roved in an intense quest, then stopped on a long table — a kind of workbench — that ran the length of a wall.

This he regarded with excited curiosity, for it bore an orderly array of jars, bottles, tubes, and many other things which, from his position on the floor, he could

not see. But he discovered enough to comprehend that it formed a small chemical laboratory. Two large retorts occupied one end of the table; and at its centre stood a small, dark spire he believed to be a Bunsen burner.

A miniature chemical laboratory — here, in Frau Greta Wanluster's supposedly unused house ! . . .

Then Ixell wondered, of a sudden, whether he was still in that surly old home of the Thalburgs. Or had he, during his stupor, been transferred elsewhere ?

Lying motionless, he speculated upon the probable length of time he had been unconscious. At the ball of the Graf and Gräfin von Zoon, he remembered, most of the victims of the gas bomb — he was now quite certain of the gas theory — had been resuscitated within half an hour. Of course, their recovery had been speeded by the ministrations of the Russian physician, Doktor Varadoff. But Ixell believed he himself could not have been in a state of coma much longer than that.

He started to lift his head — then suddenly lay unstirring, tensed. For out of another chamber, one doubtless adjoining his own, flowed the mumble of low voices !

Intently he listened. He heard a man and a woman, and the tones of neither were familiar to him. They spoke in German — an unlovely, guttural, and even uncouth German. And it was evident that both of them were far from pleased with the situation in the house.

Ixell rolled over and over until he sprawled beside

a heavy door which ostensibly had been locked upon him. Here, however, he could distinguish words.

"Pah !" the man was growling sullenly. "What else could I have done ? He came snooping around the house, trying to break in, didn't he ? *Also !* Did you expect me to show him around ?"

"You're a fool," the woman retorted flatly. "Why didn't you ask him what he wanted ?"

"After what happened last night I don't ask any questions of strangers who come snooping around here at the windows and doors !"

"He's no policeman !" she declared.

"How do you know ?"

"He doesn't even look German. And his clothes are too expensive for the ordinary *polizei.*"

"Ja ! A lot you can tell ! Why did he come sneaking in with a gun, then ? Hey ? Why ? *Himmel,* you expect me to go out and ask a man politely what he's looking for when he sneaks in with a revolver in his hand ! Last night the *polizei* almost had something on us — do you realize that ? If I hadn't got that spoon back — "

"I tell you this man is no *grüner.* He just doesn't look it to me. Besides, how do you imagine the *polizei* would ever find this place ?"

"I don't know !" the man snapped. "But I'm not going to take chances. It's lucky Herr Erok left some of those balls here or, by the stars, he might have shot me if I tried just to fight with him !"

There was a period of silence during which Barron Ixell, lying beside the door, pieced together fragments

of this conversation in a coherent whole. The man talking in the adjoining room, then, was the assailant who had stolen the spoon and the gems from Inspektor Kelmann — the one who had left the deposit of red clay on the gate.

But — was *he* the "King of Crime" ? . . .

His German, even to one with a rudimentary knowledge of the language, was far from cultured. Rather, it was boorish and common in its very intonation. Certainly such an individual had not been a guest at the Gräfin von Zoon's ball. Moreover, it was doubtful whether a man of his apparent type could prey successfully upon the élite of Prussian society, knowing precisely where to seek his loot and when. And assuredly he did not sound like a profound student of chemistry — or a student of anything, for that matter.

He had, however, mentioned a Herr Erok. Who was Herr Erok ? Ixell could not recall having heard the name at the ball.

Abruptly the woman asked, with some contempt, "What are you going to do with him ? Let him lie there ?"

"Sicher ! I'll let him stay there till Herr Erok comes. Why not ? He said he'd be here before ten. *He'll* know what to do ! He'll know if the fellow is from the *polizei !"*

In the ensuing stillness, Barron Ixell thought rapidly and with a lucidity induced by a new agitation. Herr Erok — whoever he might be — would be here before ten. To discover the identity of that gentleman and to

apprehend him, he realized, was of the utmost importance. It might, he felt, be the solution of the whole complex case.

Yet it was patently useless to hope he might aid in the accomplishment of so ambitious an end as long as he remained the prisoner of these cutting, painful bonds. If he could free himself —

Again he peered around the odd laboratory, wondering, seeking a means. By throwing down one of the retorts, it occurred to him, he might procure a bit of shattered glass — but he cast the idea out of his half-dazed mind. The sound of a broken retort would merely summon his captor, would defeat every vestige of hope.

No. Another way, a silent way. Ixell's gaze leaped about, darted here and there, and finally lingered on the Bunsen burner. If matches were near it, he might. . .

The inspiration electrified him. But first, he realized, he must manage to stand erect.

He rolled to a corner of the room and propped his shoulders against the stone wall. He could, he found, bend his knees quite high, thus drawing his heels under him for leverage. And when he pushed against the floor, at the same time wriggling his head and shoulders upward on the wall, his back slid up, up —

It was a taxing task, a laborious task, especially after his recent weakness. Twice he failed in it, collapsing limply. Breathless and pained, he rested a few seconds, then essayed a third time — and succeeded.

Though his wrists were tautly bound behind him and his ankles joined, Ixell stood vibrant. Even in the darkness his eyes were lustrous.

To hop across the room was more hazardous than difficult, since the sounds of his jumping toes might be detected in the next chamber. Moving as softly as his predicament permitted, however, he reached the laboratory table in safety; paused tensely to listen.

In the adjoining room there was not so much as a murmur.

Ixell eyed the table closely. Aligned along its far side stood at least two score jars of chemicals, all meticulously labeled — as neat a display as one might view upon a pharmacist's shelf. And he had not been mistaken in recognizing the Bunsen burner.

So this, presumably, was the workshop of "The King of Crime" — the king's court ! This stone chamber in the house belonging to Frau Greta Wanluster !

There was a little shelf on which stood a box; and in the box Ixell saw several dozen small white balls — each perhaps an inch in diameter. A few were cut into hemispheres. He reflected that when rejoined they would doubtless compress a violent amount of "Chloropaxon" or a similar gas in their hollow interiors. The King's weapons —

But this was a poor time for speculation. He had come to seek freedom in the form of matches, trusting that he would see them in the proximity of the Bunsen burner. To secure those in his pocket was, of course, unthinkable.

And this time his anticipations were not subjected

to disappointment. Just beyond the burner he discerned the familiar little box of *Zündholz!*

Barron Ixell, his features glowing with the stimulative potentialities of his scheme, turned his back to the table and sat upon its edge. Slightly it swayed, creaked; yet finally resigned itself to support him.

Far back he tilted his torso while his fingers groped for the matches. To strike one, when at last he had procured it, was a more delicate task. So tightly had his wrists been bound that his hands had scant liberty of motion. Yet, after a minute or two of patient endeavor, Ixell heard the hiss of flame leaping to the match's head!

That tiny flare flooded the stone room with a sickly yellow glimmer, revealing his countenance at once strained and hopeful.

The criminologist acted quickly. In a few seconds the fire would reach his fingertips, and it was essential that he complete his preliminary task before then — the task of lighting the Bunsen burner.

He shifted his body until his left hand touched the contrivance. To turn on its flow of gas was simplicity after his recent achievements. The match still flared. Leaning far forward, he lifted it higher, higher, until it hovered over the burner's jet.

And then — the steady, dim light of a gas flame filled the laboratory! . . . It is noteworthy that the Berlin newspapers never accorded sufficient praise to Herr Robert Wilhelm Bunsen for his share in the solution of "The King of Crime" mystery.

Barron Ixell stretched his lithe figure along the edge

of the laboratory table, lying on his side. By dint of contortive effort and patience, he succeeded in lifting over the small flame the bracelet of thick rope that encircled his wrists.

He knew that he would probably be burned — but if his plan did not fail, he believed he would suffer only a scorching, which might leave nothing worse than a few blisters and temporary pain.

"I'd rather risk the burner than Herr Erok's decisions," he reflected.

The flame touched the rope, not his skin. And presently he could hear the hemp begin to sputter softly; he could smell its burning pungency. It was not his intention to wait in that position until his bonds were entirely consumed. Such a course might involve severe agony.

As the rope smouldered, he began to pull his wrists apart in hard, short jerks. For a while this process was of no avail, save that it earned him a few painful pangs of fire.

But as he tugged, the Bunsen burner slowly ate into the hemp, weakening it. Its steady, upright flame was inexorable. The rope itself began to burn, emitting a spiral of thick, acrid smoke. Ixell was scorched more than once. Yet he continued to tug at his bonds until at last he and the burner triumphed. The rope broke.

Within two minutes he stood before the locked door, prepared to resume the quest of "The King of Crime"!

CHAPTER IX

THE PEOPLE OF THE HOUSE

IN the concise report of the case which the *Polizei-Minister* eventually compiled for the Government's records, the next few moments of the affair are accurately and crisply described:

> While considering a means of escape from the laboratory Herr Ixell made a more thorough search in the chamber. Above the table, and affixed to the wall, he discovered a cabinet which was unlocked and which contained, among other things, a long treatise on the uses, limitations, and method of producing the gas, "Chloropaxon."
>
> In addition, he found in the cabinet a tin box wherein lay seventeen balls of thin celluloid, apparently treated in a manner which rendered them as brittle as egg-shell. Because these had obviously been formed by cementing together diminutive hemispheres, he concluded that they already contained highly compressed quantities of the gas.

The sight of these gas bombs brought a shrewd yet grim expression to Ixell's face. But too much still remained to be accomplished to permit reflections upon the ingenuity of the man who had manufactured the weapons.

He was unarmed; his automatic had been taken from him together with his hat and overcoat. Yet it

was imperative that he escape his confinement before the arrival of Herr Erok.

And so Barron Ixell resolved upon the enactment of a ruse. "Intelligent trickery," he had once written, "is not to be despised, for in its loftier name — 'strategy' — it has won even wars."

He poised himself beside the locked door and began to groan. Slowly first, then more frequently, with infinite agony trembling in every sound. They were loud groans, loud enough to penetrate the thick door — loud enough, he hoped, to induce an investigation of their cause.

He had already turned off the Bunsen burner, so that he stood in darkness. And presently, as he drew a breath for a particularly pitiful moan, he heard the woman's voice:

"What's the matter with the fellow ?" She spoke impatiently and with no tolerance.

"Bah, nothing !" the man's gruff tones assured her. "He just feels a little sick after the gas, that's all."

"But, listen ! It's like pain — "

"Let him alone. It won't do *us* any harm if he groans."

There was an interval of silence during which Ixell's agony became quite insufferable.

"Go make him keep quiet !" the woman snapped. "It gets on my nerves !"

"*I* can't make him shut his mouth !"

"No ? Tell him you'll give him another dose, and he'll shut up quick enough !"

To this the reply was a grunt. Ixell, palpitant, moaned more desolately than ever.

And suddenly he heard a key turning in the door!

He waited, tensed, every muscle contracted, his eyes alive with the flames of excitement. Slowly the door opened, admitting a beam of yellow light to the laboratory. The first thing that was thrust through the aperture was — his own automatic! Next followed a square, hard face — an ugly face he had never before seen — that bore a scowl of determined resentment. It peered suspiciously into the blackness as it advanced.

And then Barron Ixell's fist swung forward through a swift, vicious arc that landed squarely and with a cracking thud upon the man's prognathous jaw!

During his long career it had frequently been necessary for him to hit people; but it is doubtful whether he ever struck anyone quite as hard or effectively as he attacked this man.

The fellow scarcely uttered a sound. He lifted his arms once in crazy gyrations, dropped the automatic, and limply staggered back to collapse upon the floor in a senseless huddle.

Ixell had retrieved the gun even before the man struck the floor.

He levelled it into a long chamber which appeared to be both a kitchen and a dining room. At its far side a woman sat — a lean, gaunt, middle-aged woman in shabby and discolored clothes — who gaped upon him mutely as if he were some terrifying apparition.

Ixell wasted no time. "Come here!" he ordered.

She stared at his determined countenance, at the weapon in his hand, at the man on the floor. Her eyes were stupefied.

"Come here!" Ixell repeated. And stupidly, uncomprehendingly, she rose and approached him. He signalled her to enter the laboratory; and when, moving like some phantom in a dream, she had mechanically obeyed, he stooped to drag the insensate man after her. But, though his left arm encircled the fellow's head while he pulled, his right hand wielded the automatic effectively.

With both his recent captors in the laboratory, Barron Ixell spoke bluntly:

"I'm going to lock you in this room," he told the dazed woman. "And in order to prevent your screams if anyone else should enter the house, I'm going to let you experience the effects of the gas you gave me not long ago. It is quite harmless. I advise you to lie down on the floor and submit to it easily. You'll simply fall asleep."

It was not a very gallant manner of deporting himself toward a woman; but she was, he knew, a member of a cunning conspiracy against society. If he left her to roam about the laboratory, her screams might warn off the expected Herr Erok. He might have bound and gagged her, but he considered his time too limited, especially since his enemies had themselves presented him with so admirable a substitute for an uncertain gag.

So Barron Ixell took from his pocket one of the little celluloid balls he had found in the cabinet and tossed

it to the laboratory floor. It broke. The woman gasped and recoiled. He slammed the great door shut before she could utter a sound, locked it, and dropped the key into his pocket.

"It is regrettable," he muttered, "but the law is sometimes compelled to use strange tools. The lady's temporary indisposition may save society from a hundred cases of unconsciousness — and robbery."

He knew precisely what he wished to do now: to communicate with the police. He himself had no authority to make arrests. Moreover, he could not guess whether Herr Erok would arrive alone or with supporters. It was the only possible course — to summon aid from the *Polizei-Ministerium*.

The criminologist found his hat and overcoat thrown across a chair in the long kitchen. As he snatched them up, he recalled that in his original survey of the house he had seen no telephone wires. Still, he decided, he could run down the hill to Zeeburg and call from the railroad station.

With his automatic poised, Ixell started to seek a means of exit. From the kitchen, which was cheerlessly illumined by two antiquated oil lamps, he passed through a dark, narrow corridor and into a room which startled him. Indeed, it constrained him to stop and stare about in wondering interest.

A gas jet, on which a small flame merrily danced, lit the chamber. It was completely and even opulently furnished. The deep chairs had the appearance of being quite new. The table, covered by an embroidered cloth, seemed massive and expensive. Several

well-chosen etchings and prints adorned the walls. It was obvious that the place had recently been used — was being used regularly, perhaps — for a sideboard supported half a dozen bottles of wine, a box of cigars, a silver cigarette humidor, and a tray loaded with sandwiches.

"A repast awaiting Herr Erok," Ixell told himself, smiling oddly. He inspected the labels of the wine bottles. Excellent Rhine products, two Burgundies, a Moselle. Behind them stood a fat-bellied bottle of Benedictine. "Herr Erok, whoever he is, displays excellent taste," he mused. "Assuredly an epicure."

His smile broadened slightly as he stood beside the collection destined for — probably — "The King of Crime." Sandwiches, cigars, cigarettes, he eyed them all. Then the smile became singularly introspective.

But Ixell banished it as he resumed his search for egress.

He found the back door with little difficulty; and the wind screamed in the trees about him as he lunged down the long hill. It was stingingly cold. The lights on the opposite shore of the Wansee, viewed through the icy night, were brilliant gems, specks of dazzling gold.

At the station Ixell saw that it was a quarter to ten. "It'll take you several minutes to get a connection with Berlin at this hour," the lonely station-master warned him, warming his hands over a coal stove. He was right. When the criminologist finally spoke to the *Polizei-Ministerium,* it was five minutes of ten.

But his patience was rewarded when he learned that

Haupt-Inspektor Otto Kelmann, quite recovered now, was himself at the *Ministerium*.

"I'll bring a dozen men!" the Inspektor snapped. "Can't tell how many we're apt to meet up there. With fast cars and a speedboat, we'll reach Zeeburg in twenty-five minutes! The house on the hill, *ja!*"

Ixell could not restrain a grin as he started back up the hill. The Inspektor's voice had been vibrant with eagerness.

He walked quickly, wondering whether the two people in the laboratory would have regained consciousness. And also he wondered whether Herr Erok could have arrived during his absence. . .

Governed by this thought, Barron Ixell entered the little back door very softly, his pistol ready for instant use. He remembered the path to the well-furnished chamber and followed it, proceeding with infinite caution.

The house was hushed. The taps of his own toes were the only sounds, save for the continuous howling of the gale. Presently he discerned the dim glow of the room which was his goal. He stopped to listen, checked his breath. The place was utterly silent.

He moved on with greater confidence, though still carefully, and at last entered the familiar chamber with its well-stocked sideboard.

And when he stepped into that room, Barron Ixell suddenly halted. Inherently he was a man of staunch nerves, but now a chilling shudder crawled through him. His eyes widened in amazement and, despite himself, his cheeks lost their color.

On the carpet, stretched out in front of the sideboard, lay a man.

He sprawled on his back, his long arms reaching out beyond his head, one knee drawn up in a last jerk of agony. The whiteness of his shirt-bosom was hideously discolored by a formless splash of crimson — a stain that had already dripped to the carpet.

Even before he knelt, Barron Ixell knew that the man was dead. He recognized him immediately.

It was the eminent chemist, Doktor Gustave Wanluster.

CHAPTER X

THE KING OF CRIME

TEN minutes later the American criminologist conducted a most illuminating inquest in that chamber of tragedy. He stood in the centre of the room, his automatic in his hand, and confronted the uncouth couple he had a short time earlier locked in the laboratory.

Both the woman and the man slumped in the depths of great chairs, their countenances ghastly, terrified. They stared in a sort of morbid, horrified fascination at the body on the floor; lifted their eyes only to gape at Ixell in pleading anguish.

The evidences of the effect the gas had wrought on them lay in their yellow complexions. The man, indeed, appeared still to be the victim of a lingering stupor; but the woman had travelled much farther toward complete recovery.

Ixell spoke quietly, yet with compelling sharpness. He addressed the woman:

"You say this is not Herr Erok ?"

Dazedly she shook her head. *"Nein,* it is not Erok — not Erok !"

"You know this man ?"

"Nein!"

"You never saw him before?"

"Never — I swear it!"

"But you heard the shot which killed him?"

She hesitated but finally nodded. *"Ja,* I — heard the shot." Her voice was extremely low, awed, and she looked at the body as though it had entranced her eyes.

Ixell regarded the gaunt woman piercingly. "Why is it," he asked, "that you recovered so quickly from the gas?"

"Why! Why —" She raised her stare suddenly as if the query had just penetrated her mind. "Because I knew what it was you threw to the floor. One of the little balls. So I ran to the broken window and breathed the fresh wind that came in. But the gas caught me — not very badly — still it caught me. I lay on the floor till I heard — till they woke me, it seemed —"

Abruptly she stopped, swift fear sweeping across her hard features. Perhaps she dreaded that she had been telling too much.

But Ixell gestured for emphasis with the automatic. When he spoke again, his tones were whip-cracks: "The police are on the way here! This man has been murdered! Unless you talk, you and your husband will hang for the murder!"

"Hang?" She half rose, then sank back trembling, pallid, her eyes protruding in incredulity.

"You and your husband are accomplices of Herr Erok. You will hang with him. Your only chance of

saving your life is to talk. Tell the truth ! What did you hear — exactly ?"

A moment the woman considered her dilemma. Visibly quaking, she turned to her husband for advice. But the stupefied man was still gaping in mute horror at the body of Doktor Wanluster.

Of a sudden she faced Ixell with a fine display of defiance. "All right ! I'll talk ! What's Herr Erok to me ? *I* didn't kill this man and neither did my husband ! And we *won't* hang for it, see ? I'll talk, all right !"

"Very well — " He nodded attentively.

"I heard their voices. They were shouting at each other in anger — Herr Erok and, I guess, this man. Then the woman joined — "

"The woman ?" Ixell's eyes narrowed quickly.

"*Ja.* Frau Wanluster."

"You know her ?"

"Of course ! This is her house, isn't it ? She came here often with Herr Erok — maybe a couple of times a week."

"So. . . . Go on. What did you hear?" Ixell was tense.

The woman shrugged. "I'm not sure. I was only half awake then. But I thought the stranger's voice — this — this man's — shouted something like "I *knew* I'd find you here ! I *knew !'* Then there was a lot of confusion I didn't understand until the same voice cried, '— because you thought *I* was in Dresden !' There was much noise after that. And Frau Wanluster screamed. Then I heard the shot. . . Nothing

else until Frau Wanluster kind of sobbed for Herr Erok to take her home."

A moment there was stillness. Barron Ixell's brain worked rapidly. "You are positive you recognized Frau Wanluster's voice ?"

"Certainly. Don't I know her ?"

"Didn't Herr Erok call to you and your husband ?"

"*Ja. Sicher.* But I was still too weak to answer. My husband was just coming to his senses."

"And all this happened while I was out of the house — " Ixell muttered to himself. "Erok departed with Frau Wanluster ?"

"Guess so," the woman dully answered. "Guess — guess he thought we were out. He often sends us out when he comes."

"And doubtless he thought your husband would have sense enough, when he returned, to throw the body into the Wansee. I see. Yes, I see very clearly."

The woman writhed and again eyed the body by the sideboard. She seemed about to sink into a reverie when Barron Ixell roused her with a sharp query: "Who is Herr Erok ?"

She stared. "Who ? . . . Herr Erok is — Herr Erok ! Who should he be ?"

"What's his real name ? Don't hide things !" he snapped.

"I don't know what you mean !" she retorted. "If he has another name, he never told it to *us !* He is Herr Sigismund Erok — that's all I know !"

She appeared, the criminologist thought, to be telling the truth. Probably, indeed, she was too pro-

foundly terrified by the sudden tragedy to lie. Moreover, he believed that the "King of Crime" was too clever and ingenious a gentleman to divulge his real identity even to underlings.

He said: "Tell me what you know about Herr Erok — everything!"

But here he encountered unexpected opposition. The surly man who had been silent roused himself, uttering an oath. He lifted his ugly, aggressive head to glare at the inquisitor; and he snarled:

"You go to the devil! We don't know anything to tell, see?"

Thoughtfully Ixell regarded him, meanwhile significantly swaying the automatic. And after an interval he observed, in the calmest, yet most disturbing, of tones:

"But if you don't know anything, we — the police — do. We know, for example, that at three o'clock last night you assaulted Haupt-Inspektor Otto Kelmann of the *polizei* — who, by the way, will be here in a few minutes." He saw the man's rocky face lose some of its defiance as the jaws sagged and the eyes opened wide. "We know," he went on placidly, "that you hid behind a hedge on the corner of Bismarck-Platz and Händel-Strasse in the Grünewald until the Inspektor passed, when you struck him. We know you stole jewels and a spoon from his pocket. And all of this, of course, will send you to prison."

The man had again become pallid. His eyes seemed to bulge as he gaped upon Ixell. His calloused hands curled around the arms of his chair, squeezing until

the knuckles were yellow. Once he glanced at his wife, then swallowed loudly.

"What I fear," said Ixell in that same quiet voice, "is that the *polizei,* when they find the little laboratory in this house, will not know how distant your connection with the gas bombs really is. They may condemn you and send *you* to prison for a few of Herr Erok's crimes instead of merely for attacking the Inspektor. So, if you wish to make your sentence as short as possible, if you wish to win the sympathy of the law, I advise you to speak. You'd better come across with a frank story. I'm ready to listen."

The threat, he saw, had won. A few times the man gulped, but terror had welled in him. He spoke at last. His guttural intonations were low, wary, defensive, every word guarded. Yet he told a most interesting tale:

"We're the caretakers, see? We didn't really *do* anything — just kind of looked on. About a year ago Herr Erok got us this job. Then he and Frau Wanluster started coming out here. Guess it was a nice, quiet place where they could tell each other how much they loved each other, see? But that wasn't any of our business. It was her house, and she paid us to look after it — that's all.

"Pretty soon Herr Erok came out alone one day. He gave us two thousand marks to let him fix up that laboratory in the stone room. He said he'd pay us well if we kept our mouths shut. Well, he paid well, all right. You couldn't complain about money. Even Frau Wanluster didn't know about the laboratory.

She never went into the stone room. It was just a secret 'tween us — Herr Erok and us. He used to come alone once a week or so to work in the place."

The man paused; but he continued almost at once:

"I got curious about what he was doing in that laboratory. Pretty soon he needed me to help with things — little things. He paid mighty generously, see? So I didn't question him. But one day, while he was working, he fell unconscious. I ran in to get him, and I toppled over too. He didn't explain much that time. But later, when I read in the newspapers about how things were happening to unconscious people — well, I'm no fool. I told him what I knew. See? And he was generous again. Got me to help him more than ever after that. . . And there's the whole story."

"No, it isn't all," Ixell said. "How about last night? About that spoon — ?"

"Ach, that. . ." The man considered, as if wondering how much to tell. He scowled at the floor. His glance passed to the body of Doktor Wanluster. Then, unexpectedly, he shivered. "That," he growled, "was *his* fault — Herr Erok's! He used to telephone me here sometimes — give me orders — "

"You have no telephone."

"I know. But I've got a friend in a house half way down the hill. Herr Erok always called that house and had me summoned, see? That was our way. My friend didn't know what it was all about, of course," he added hastily. Then: "Well, I got a call from Erok about half-past one last night. He ordered me to

go to that Grünewald house where there was a ball and to watch for the big man who looked like von Hindenburg. I was to — to get him — to get a spoon he was supposed to be carrying. I didn't want to do anything like that and said so. But Erok got terribly hot and told me I had to; if I didn't, he said, we'd all go to jail. So there wasn't any choice, see ?

"I went and watched the house till the big fellow came out. Then I followed."

"Where are the jewels you took from him ?" Ixell interrupted.

The man scowled, squirmed. But his wife snapped, "We've got them and we'll turn them back if the *polizei* promise we won't be held for the things Herr Erok — "

She stopped suddenly. There was the sound of heavy feet, many of them, pounding through the house. A deep voice called a menacing challenge.

And an instant later Inspektor Kelmann led his crowd into the silent room.

It was eleven o'clock precisely when a long, powerful department car swooped down the dark street in which the Wanlusters resided. It carried Kelmann, Barron Ixell, and three uniformed men.

Another such automobile was bearing the caretakers — their names, it developed, were Albrecht and Selma Jager — to the *Ministerium;* and in the lonely house on the Zeeburg hill four silent policemen guarded a body while they awaited the medical examiner.

Barron Ixell was saying in a soft voice as he peered

ahead through the night: "A pretty mess it was. This Herr Erok enjoying his clandestine little affair with the dazzling Frau Wanluster and meanwhile using her house for his gas-manufacturing laboratory! A Don Juan with a Jesse James complex, it seems — eh, Inspektor? He must know a great deal about the flutterings of your more be-jewelled butterflies, for he managed to catch quite a few of them with his little gas bombs. And, by the way, you see now why he opened the window in the von Zoon antechamber?"

"To let the gas out after it had done its work, I suppose," the Inspektor muttered.

"Exactly. Quite clever, that. No one entering the room later would be affected. Also, he threw a little bomb down to Detective Kroz, just to inspire the theory that the thief used the back corridor. Usually, I take it, the thief gathered up his pieces of shattered celluloid, thus taking clues away with him. But he missed the one under Kroz." Ixell drew a long breath. "Another thoughtful thing Herr Erok did was to persuade Frau Wanluster to call him by that name in the presence of those caretakers. Probably he told her it might help to avoid scandal for them in case of — h'm — a pinch. Certainly he was clever enough to think of *some* reason to give her."

They sat silent until the Inspektor sighed. "Poor old Wanluster! He was a good man — a great chemist — "

"But a poor husband, for he couldn't hold his wife. I fancy he suspected her, however. He told everybody he was going to Dresden today — then stayed in Berlin

to watch her. He followed her and Erok to the house, plunged into one of those tempestuous triangle situations, and — it cost him his life. I think you'll try Erok for murder, not theft — "

The car stopped at the curb within a block of the Wanluster residence. The house, they could see, still showed a few illumined windows.

"You think we'll find Herr Erok here ?" Kelmann murmured as he stepped to the sidewalk.

"He took Frau Wanluster home," Ixell replied drily.

The raid on the house was, in its way, sensational. The *polizei* surrounded the place; then Inspektor Kelmann rang at the door.

An astonished maid opened it and replied to a question that Frau Wanluster was home, yes; but she had just been escorted back from a theatre and felt too indisposed to see anyone —

Rather ruthlessly the big Kelmann pushed his way into the house. Ixell followed. Before them stood the door of a brilliantly lit drawing room. As they approached it, someone within the chamber slammed it shut !

"So !" Inspektor Kelmann suddenly bellowed. "You want to fight it out in there, do you ?" And he hurled his tremendous weight at the door that stood between him and "The King of Crime."

It opened an inch or two, encountered another body, and was violently pushed back.

"Remember we're armed !" Kelmann cried threateningly.

A voice snarled back: "So am I !"

Kelmann cursed. Then a hand touched his arm. He looked around and glowered at Barron Ixell's calm, grave countenance.

"It's useless to fight," the criminologist said. "When you had the door open just now, I threw one of the gentleman's little bombs to him. I still have a few in my pocket, you know — found them in the laboratory. Just a little patience, Inspektor, and we'll pull him out without resistance. You hold that door shut. I'll have the windows opened from the outside to air the room before we enter." He smiled. "Why not learn even from our adversaries ?"

In ten minutes they entered the drawing room without opposition.

They saw the fascinating Frau Greta Wanluster stretched on a settee, unconscious. And on the floor beside her lay the man known as Herr Erok — overcome by "Chloropaxon".

He was in evening clothes — a handsome, bald gentleman with a monocle on the carpet at his side.

"Gott !" gasped Inspektor Kelmann, staring.

Ixell nodded slowly. "Our charming host of yesterday," he said, "the Graf Ludvig Heinrich von Zoon himself."

AT LUNCH, the following day, Inspektor Kelmann declared: "It's amazing ! The man actually dropped a bomb in the room, probably behind one of the palms, and threw another down at Kroz ! He himself pretended to use his handkerchief, and in it he had concealed the piece of gauze ! After the robbery he

opened the window, buried his loot and the gauze, and lay down on the floor. By that time there wasn't much gas left in the chamber. The 'Chloropaxon' did put him to sleep, of course, but most of his ailment was simulated. He later telephoned to that hireling of his while he was supposedly resting in his room. He has an extension there, you know."

"I know," said Barron Ixell, smiling.

"When you look back at things, it's all startlingly clear. I think the Graf von Zoon learned a good deal about gases in the war. In the panic of revolution, he lost his own money — as did most of our nobles — and lived on that of the woman he married. And I guess she didn't allow him any too much! He had this 'affair' with Frau Wanluster — " Suddenly Kelmann peered suspiciously.

"I say, Herr Ixell! Just when," he demanded, "did *you* know our man was Graf von Zoon? You didn't seem much astonished last night — "

The criminologist reached for the salt. "I suspected it," he answered slowly, "when I looked at the sideboard of that well-furnished *chambre d'amour* in the Zeeburg house."

"Why?"

"Because the cigars in the box there, you know, were the same excellent and exclusive Havanas we were so generously served at the von Zoon ball. . . Do you mind passing the bread, if you please, Inspektor?"

BOOK IV GENEVA

FOLLOW THE RED LINE!

FOLLOW THE RED LINE!

CHAPTER I

FOLLOW THE RED LINE!

ACCORDING to the records of Geneva's police department, the astonishing case of "The Red Line" began with the tragic disappearance of the Russian diplomat, Wladimir Cherka.

At precisely two o'clock in the morning, the Soviet statesman departed from the Comtesse Marguerite de Vieumont's garden fête. He left in his limousine, accompanied only by Doctor Arnold Renheim. It was not later than two-thirty, Doctor Renheim subsequently testified, when the Russian dropped him at the Hotel des Deux Mondes.

So much — and no more — the authorities were able to ascertain.

At three that night a sudden thunderstorm swept across the Alps — a black tempest as furious and uproarous as it was unheralded. Against the lashing rain and wind a disgruntled *agent de police* pushed his bicycle. His shoulders hunched, his head bent, he turned into the Rue des Serfs. Even in the frequent flares of greenish lightning he saw little more than the wet pavement immediately under his feet.

So it chanced that Agent Merriot almost collided with the limousine before he became aware of its presence.

The car — afterwards identified as Monsieur Cherka's — stood in the very centre of the roadway, all its lights extinguished. Its two right doors swung open, thrashed by the rain; and their panes had been utterly shattered.

As Agent Merriot started around the side of the automobile, his hand instinctively reached toward his holster. The deluge beat upon him like some force struggling to drive him back. It battered his face, while the gale shrieked premonition in his ears.

At that instant a brilliant zig-zag slashed the skies. Momentarily the black street was illumined — and Agent Merriot stopped. He remained motionless, staring; and thereafter he refrained from touching the car.

For the swift flash of light had revealed the body of the chauffeur limply, grotesquely huddled over the steering wheel. His arms dangled. His head lolled, drenched by the torrents that poured through the broken windshield.

At the first glimpse of the man, Agent Merriot thought his death must be the result of some strange motoring accident. But then, as another bolt of lightning tore through the skies, he distinctly discerned the ugly cleavage across the chauffeur's head — the mark of a fatal bullet !

At once the astounded policeman focussed the beam of his flashlight into the limousine's tonneau.

He found its small carpet crumpled and dragged half out to the step. The commodious upholstery of the back seat had been wrenched out of place. And a galaxy of glass fragments, strewn about the floor, glittered like spangles under the searching ray of light. . .

This, briefly, was the extent of Agent Merriot's discovery. It was obvious that Wladimir Cherka had not been taken from that car without a violent combat. Moreover, his chauffeur must have joined in the fight, too — at the sacrifice of his life.

"To the identity of the assailants," said Monsieur Aristide Lerouge, Geneva's Prefect of Police, "there was not a single clue. Not one! If at any time there had been fingerprints on the limousine, the rain had effectively obliterated them. In truth, the car offered nothing save the evidence of a terrific struggle and — the body of the chauffeur. The man had been instantly killed by the bullet that split his scalp."

Who had attacked the Russian diplomat? Why? . . . The explanation arrived at the Prefecture the next morning, by express letter.

And that letter, together with the folded map which accompanied it, was termed by the Prefect himself a "masterpiece of criminal ingenuity executed by a ruthless and reckless genius!"

It was remarkable not only because of the stupendous ransom it demanded for Cherka's life — a sum approximating $1,000,000; not only because of the further kidnappings it threatened; but chiefly because of the unique and appalling method of extortion it innovated.

"Not merely an *original* conception," declared Monsieur Lerouge, "but one so perfectly planned that there seemed no means of defeating it." He even added candidly, "It left the police at an absolute standstill."

Though the newspapers ranted and screamed, though the authorities of all Switzerland aided in the search for Wladimir Cherka and his captors, the Government did not, during the first three days, offer to pay the 5,000,000 Swiss francs so brazenly asked by the abductors.

As a consequence of this delay — or so it was interpreted — a second diplomat was kidnapped!

He was Senator Enrico Culadi, one of the Italian delegates to the imminent summer session of the League of Nations. Three nights after the disappearance of Cherka, Senator Culadi motored from Lausanne to Geneva with a Russian lady, Madame Olga Sitviloff. He took Madame Sitviloff to her apartment, then started for his hotel.

A sportsman of some note, Senator Culadi was driving his own car. And like Cherka's limousine, this automobile was found abandoned — and Culadi gone. But there were no indications of combat. Apparently the Italian had been overcome before he could fight. . . And again the assailants had left no clues!

What they did leave was a slip of paper on Culadi's seat. It bore a simple, short message:

"Follow the red line!"

And that was all.

Such was the situation, then, when, on the morning

after Culadi's disappearance, Monsieur Aristide Lerouge telegraphed to the American criminologist, Barron Ixell.

Ixell, at the time, was enjoying a short vacation in Lucerne; but he went to Geneva immediately.

There were those who questioned the policy of enlisting the aid of an American against a force operating solely in Switzerland. Geneva's Prefect of Police, however, had reasons of his own for sending for the man who had helped more than one European police official out of a very tight hole; and M. Lerouge was not a person with false ideas of pride.

"Crime," he maintained, "is an international disease and must be treated as such. I feel altogether justified in consulting Mr. Ixell — as justified as I should feel in consulting an American medical specialist in the event of grave personal illness! Moreover, with the statesmen of the world assembling for the League meeting, every possible precaution against further kidnappings must be taken. And the summoning of Mr. Ixell I regard as a precaution!"

CHAPTER II

THE LETTER AND THE MAP

IN the garage of the Prefecture, Barron Ixell examined the limousine with what might have been deemed exaggerated care.

Half a dozen times he slowly circled it, peering at the broken panes and at the interior. The steel frame just above the smashed windshield was peculiarly nicked — doubtless the mark of a bullet. And this he regarded more fixedly than anything else.

"The car, like Senator Culadi's which you have just seen," said Monsieur Lerouge, "is in precisely the same condition as it was when found."

Ixell nodded. "You say it did not belong to Monsieur Cherka ?"

"No. He had rented it, together with the chauffeur's services, for the duration of his stay in Geneva. Many diplomats do it."

The American finally turned away from the limousine — and his strange expression somewhat startled the Prefect. It was one of introspection, of perplexity, almost of annoyance; yet the eyes, paradoxically, were not at all preoccupied. Rather, they were oddly brilliant and narrowed.

"Thank you, Monsieur," he said. "Now if I may see the letter and the map —"

They went at once to the Prefect's office; and there Barron Ixell read one of the most clever documents he had ever encountered. As Monsieur Lerouge tendered it across his spacious mahogany desk, he confessed with a trace of bitterness:

"I imagined, Monsieur, that I had learned every method of extortion the criminal mind had so far devised. In fact, I thought I had fought against most of them myself. But this idea —" A short, dry laugh fell from his tight lips. *"Eh bien,* you will see for yourself !"

Ixell, accepting the letter, did not answer. He widened his eyes, however, when he began to read.

It was evening, and the light over the desk splashed profusely on his countenance. Observing that face, while his guest read, the Prefect was conscious of a slight disillusionment. He had formed the mental preconception of a stern visaged, scowling scholar of crime — an elderly gentleman, perhaps — whose features would bear the records of several noteworthy achievements.

Instead he found a man still in his mid-thirties whose rather long face bore no lines. His brown hair was smoothly combed. He was neither extraordinarily tall nor unusually rugged; yet the unmistakable evidence of vigor hovered in his definite gestures. And he was wearing a grey suit whose impeccable cut promptly extricated him from that category of careless, pre-

occupied students into which Monsieur Lerouge had previously cast him.

The Prefect suddenly snatched himself out of the reverie. There were other things to be done. He began unfolding a huge map of Switzerland — a map across which a vivid red line had been drawn.

Barron Ixell, reading the letter, discovered nothing particularly novel in its first sentences — save the audacious sum it demanded. The note had been printed in ink, with bold, hard strokes. Monsieur Wladimir Cherka, it announced, was being held in captivity until the required ransom was paid. To expedite this payment, other diplomats visiting Geneva would periodically be kidnapped until the money was supplied. Should it be too long delayed, however, or should it be refused, the statesmen would be killed, one at a time, until the Government of Switzerland finally acceded. . .

Thus, you will understand that promptness on your part is as essential as capitulation itself.

Ixell's brows contracted. "Apparently," he murmured, "they are in the hands of a cultured man. His choice of words is irreproachable."

The Prefect nodded agreement; but the American criminologist was already delving into the second half of the letter.

And here he struck that bit of astonishing ingenuity, of shrewd invention, to which Monsieur Lerouge had so bitterly referred. It lay in the directions for the means in which the 5,000,000 Swiss francs were to be delivered by the Government:

With this note we are forwarding a map of Switzerland on which, you will observe, a red line has been traced. The line runs from Geneva to Zurich, proceeding along an indirect route.

It is our stipulation that you dispatch an aeroplane from Geneva with the funds *in cash* enclosed in a steel-banded box. The key to this box is to be affixed to it with strong wire.

The plane will follow the route indicated by the red line, flying at all times as low as the topography of the country permits and never deviating from the prescribed course. It will leave Geneva at 6:30 P. M.

Somewhere between Geneva and Zurich the plane will be signalled by red flares. It is essential, therefore, that your aviators constantly maintain a diligent survey of the ground.

At the point where it is signalled, the plane will circle low and drop the case containing the funds as closely as possible to the flares. It will then proceed to Zurich.

There was more, all of it written in faultless French, but Barron Ixell paused to glance across the desk at the thickset Prefect.

"Unique, eh ?" snapped Monsieur Lerouge. "Devilishly unique !"

"Devilishly ambitious," answered Ixell, somewhat absently, as he read on:

To facilitate our vigil, you will have the Geneva newspapers announce, one day in advance, when the plane will leave. But you will make public neither the route it is to take nor the signal it is to seek. You understand that it would be disastrous to our hostages to have some impostor, desirous of obtaining the funds, set off false flares on the designated path.

"They take all precautions, you see," said the Prefect as Barron Ixell finally replaced the letter on the desk. He continued to regard it curiously, meanwhile

lifting a cigarette from a silver case and thoughtfully tapping its tip.

Suddenly Monsieur Lerouge rose — a heavy, ponderous man in black, his square countenance rock-hard. He pointed a squat finger at the immense map he had unfolded on the desk.

"That red line, Monsieur !" he snapped. "I have traced it carefully. It follows neither railroad nor automobile road. It crosses mountains and valleys, passes over lakes and dense forests. It skirts inaccessible mountain slopes, goes over wild cliffs. It — it — " He paused, his hand, unwittingly curling into a fist. "There," he exclaimed, "lies the cleverness of the scheme ! . . . The distance between Geneva and Zurich, following that red line, is approximately two hundred and eighty kilometers — almost two hundred miles ! And how are we to watch so great a district of absolute wilderness, not knowing at which point to — to seek anyone ?"

"You have already sent a scout plane over the route, I understand," said Ixell, quite forgetting to light his cigarette.

"Yes — the day before yesterday. It went to Zurich and back and discovered nothing !"

Monsieur Lerouge's knuckles rapped the map.

"Voilà," he said acridly, "that is the ingenuity of it. They do not tell us to deliver the money here or there at a definite spot which may be watched. No. The *canailles* mark a route of two hundred miles into which even automobiles cannot penetrate. And doubtless they'll send up their flares at a point where the plane

won't be able to effect a landing within miles! It — *parbleu,* Monsieur, it makes one feel as helpless as a child!"

Unexpectedly the Prefect turned away and strode to the window. He stood there with his hands rigidly clasped behind him, his head thrust forward. He glowered out into the night and spoke to the darkness rather than to Ixell — spoke in curt, sharp-clipped phrases that burst like bubbles from his grim lips.

"Monsieur Ixell," he said, "I'm admitting the truth to you: we have arrived nowhere with our investigations! Who is behind this crime? How were Cherka and Culadi kidnapped? We are as far from the truth of this case today as we were three days ago. That is why I telegraphed you. If —" He came back to the desk. "If you see any way of going ahead, you are free to act. You have *carte blanche!*"

Ixell smiled, rather drily. Then he frowned at the tip of his cigarette.

"Monsieur Lerouge," he said seriously, "I think I should like to begin by talking to Doctor Arnold Renheim and to Madame Olga Sitviloff, since they were the last to see the diplomats."

"Now?"

"Yes, at once."

The Prefect looked down across his desk narrowly.

"Very well, Monsieur," he agreed, "I'll have their apartments called."

But telephoning elicited only the fact that neither the doctor nor the Russian lady was at home; nor could the probable hour of their return be ascertained.

"In that case," said Ixell reflectively, "I should like to inspect the rooms of Cherka and Senator Culadi."

"You think their chambers can offer any clue to their whereabouts — ? Inspector Charrine has already gone over the rooms — "

"Perhaps not," Barron Ixell interrupted, rising briskly. "But the point, Monsieur, is this: Time wasted in *groping* for a means of procedure will doubtless endanger the lives of both Cherka and Culadi." He crushed the half-consumed cigarette in a tray. "If we cannot find the victims through the assailants, let us try to find the assailants through the victims. . . I'd like to see, if possible, whether we can discover any reason for Cherka's and Senator Culadi's having been kidnapped in preference to all the other diplomats in Geneva."

"I understand," muttered Monsieur Lerouge. "But their suites revealed nothing. We searched — " He checked himself, suddenly, and turned to the door. "But very well!" he decided. "You may find a significance which we missed."

So they went, starting first for the rooms of Wladimir Cherka.

A department car sped them through the soft summer darkness — a night scintillant with stars. Up the Quai Mont Blanc, along the shore of the silent Lake Leman on whose far side the mighty Savoy Alps rose in a jagged black wall; and at last into the flowered grounds of the hotel. . . Barron Ixell and Monsieur Aristide Lerouge taking their first joint step in the solution of the "Red Line" mystery.

The manager of the Hotel des Etoiles willingly yielded the key to Cherka's suite. "Following your instructions, M'sieu' le Prefect," he said, "I have permitted no one to enter the rooms. Shall I accompany you ?"

This offer Monsieur Lerouge declined; he understood the value of privacy too well.

With Ixell he was taken in the lift to the fourth floor. The carpeted corridor, they found, was deserted and strangely hushed — hushed with that air of heavy, enforced respectability hotel halls of the better kind so conscientiously assume. It was as if they walked in a padded lane.

Monsieur Lerouge led the way to Suite 23. He spoke softly as he inserted the key and opened the door. He spoke even while they entered — indeed, until he switched on the lights.

And then — a half finished word died in his throat.

He stood utterly still, staring. Once an ejaculation leaped to his tongue, but somehow it was stifled. He swallowed and continued to gape. And at his side Ixell remained motionless, almost expressionless.

For facing them across the chamber were two men.

And they were levelling steady automatics at the Prefect and at Barron Ixell !

CHAPTER III

CHERKA'S VISITORS

FOR a soundless moment not one of the four men in that room stirred. Those who gripped the automatics appeared as profoundly astounded as Ixell and the Prefect. Their eyes had widened; and now they glanced at each other, obviously bewildered.

Then, slowly, the pistols were lowered; and the taller of the armed men bent his head in a slight bow.

"I — I beg your pardon, Monsieur le Prefect," he said, somewhat unsteadily. "We were hardly expecting *you*."

Aided by a long, swift breath, the ponderous Monsieur Lerouge quickly regained his poise. He swung the door closed, eyed those before him keenly.

"May I ask what you gentlemen are doing here ?" he demanded. "I left explicit orders that these rooms were not to be entered !"

"I am sorry. We — ah — found it necessary to enter, Monsieur." Quite composed now, the tall man spoke French with a deep, almost guttural accent that could never have been developed in either France or Switzerland. "If we infringed upon your orders," he

finished, "I regret it infinitely." The room seemed to rumble with the reverberations of his powerful voice.

The Prefect, about to challenge his presence further, peered at the man. He reconsidered, however, and turned to Ixell long enough to explain identities.

The tall man — lean to the verge of being cadaverous and possessed of a pointed bald head — was Monsieur Serge Majerski, the diplomatic associate in Geneva of the kidnapped Wladimir Cherka. In his way, he was a very impressive man; his prominently boned face, his deep-set, brilliant eyes, the amazing expanse of his forehead — all suggested intense nervous energy accompanied by admirable self-restraint and governed by a keen intelligence. Why one gathered this idea of him, it was difficult to decide; yet one could not avoid it.

His companion was a much younger man — probably not more than thirty. He was still startled and fingered his pistol as if nothing would please him more than to throw it away. "Nicolai Borov, the personal secretary of Monsieur Cherka" — so the Prefect described him. Dark, indubitably handsome, yet visibly uneasy, Borov appeared content to leave the conversation to the older Russian.

"You haven't told us," said Ixell, who had been eying their weapons, "why you found it necessary to enter here, Monsieur Majerski. You were awaiting someone — ?"

"With great uncertainty, yes."

"Who ?" snapped Monsieur Lerouge.

Majerski shrugged and slipped the pistol into his pocket. "I wish I knew that," he answered.

A scowl sprang to Monsieur Lerouge's countenance. He detested evasion — and this savored of it. He turned from Majerski to Borov and bluntly declared:

"I don't know what you mean."

Cherka's secretary, directly addressed, started; and in a sharp, tense way, he said:

"In his official position, Monsieur Cherka is in possession of much information which may be of value to others. And we believe that since his — his disappearance, someone has attempted to secure that information."

"What makes you think that?" Ixell quietly interposed.

"I have found the desk drawer open — "

"So you have been in these rooms, Monsieur Borov?"

The secretary flushed, but in self-vindication rather than in guilt. "It was imperative!" he replied. "Monsieur Cherka let me have my key to his rooms. I have to enter from time to time for — data, for papers — "

The sentence dwindled into an awkward silence which, for an instant, was permitted to persist.

Then Ixell glanced at Serge Majerski. "And you, Monsieur — ?"

The diplomat, arching his brows, lifted an eloquent hand.

"You have the explanation," he said, rather drily. "When Borov informed me he believed this suite sub-

ject to nocturnal visits, I decided to join him in maintaining a watch."

At that the Prefect of Police stepped forward. "Why didn't you notify the authorities?" he demanded.

Majerski frowned. For the first time he seemed disconcerted. But he answered slowly:

"Monsieur le Prefect, there was nothing definite to tell; merely Borov's suspicions. We were attempting to substantiate them tonight."

The Prefect looked at Barron Ixell. He appeared at once baffled and angered, as if he weren't at all certain of how to regard this facile alibi. Then he sent a dogged stare around the chamber.

"Messieurs," he said, "I'll station a detective here. You needn't trouble yourselves any longer." And he spoke in a tone which may have meant nothing or everything.

To Barron Ixell it seemed that both Russians were secretly relieved by this hint for their retirement from the suite. At any rate, they departed with the vague air of having gracefully escaped an embarrassing position.

Majerski, in truth, never sacrificed his consummate poise. He left as though the act were a gracious concession. A diplomat to his fingertips — albeit a minor diplomat — he bowed to both Ixell and the Prefect in unruffled friendliness.

But the instant he was gone, Monsieur Lerouge muttered softly, yet quite savagely:

"Parbleu! What is one to do? I know their being

here was against my orders. I know their explanation sounded ridiculously feeble. . . But *nom d'un nom,* can I apprehend the Russian statesman, Serge Majerski, for being in his associate's rooms ? Cherka's fate involves sufficient displeasure in Moscow now ! They won't tolerate what they'll term 'indignities' to their other representative. . . Bah ! Sometimes, Monsieur Ixell, we police are compelled to shut our eyes and pretend not to see ! We must endure little infractions of our rules in order to avoid big debacles ! If I'd found anybody else in these rooms, I'd have placed him under arrest !"

"Majerski and Borov live in this hotel ?" asked Ixell.

"Yes — the entire Russian corps comes here. That explains their entering here without being seen."

"H'm." Ixell looked about the salon. "I wonder," he murmured, "what they were really trying to find. Certainly they weren't telling the whole truth — " And his tones trailed off in thoughtfulness.

What that truth was he could not discover. He moved carefully about the three rooms of the suite, examining every item of interest with utmost care, but found nothing worthy of more than cursory curiosity.

A clue to the identity of the Russian diplomat's kidnappers ? A clue to his whereabouts ? Monsieur Aristide Lerouge was convinced that these chambers could not yield it. His men had inspected the apartment thoroughly.

Yet Ixell presently picked up a sheet of writing

paper from among several others on the desk. It bore an incipent letter — merely three words of it:

"My dear one —"

Over the American's shoulder the Prefect frowned at the paper.

"Inspector Charrine questioned Borov about that," he said, before Ixell could speak.

"Yes ?" The criminologist looked around in quick interest. "And what did Borov say ?"

"That he didn't know to whom Monsieur Cherka was writing it. All he knew was that Cherka was interrupted and couldn't go on."

"I see —" For a while Ixell contemplated the note. Then: "Is Monsieur Cherka a married man ?"

"No. . . That was why Inspector Charrine questioned the phrase, 'My dear one.'"

"And did the inspector pursue his investigations along that line ?"

Something like a deprecating grunt escaped the Prefect of Police. "No," he admitted. "It doesn't bear any visible connection with the man's present plight, however; and moreover —"

What might have been the "moreover" Barron Ixell did not learn. The Prefect's hesitant defense of Inspector Charrine was ended by the peremptory and shrill summons of the telephone in the adjoining room.

So unexpectedly did the bell sound that both men started, turned toward it. Momentarily the Prefect's brows rose in wonder.

But he went to the telephone without any mis-

givings. It must be some communication, some query, from the manager of the hotel, he decided. Or else, possibly, the Prefecture was calling —

He answered sharply. Yes, it was the Prefecture. A man's excited voice rattling over the wire. . .

Barron Ixell, watching, slipped the sheet of writing paper into his pocket. He had been wondering who the "dear one" was to whom Cherka intended to write. But now, seeing the massive face of Monsieur Lerouge assume a slow and even horrified pallor, seeing the man's great hand tighten around the telephone until the knuckles were protuberant and yellow, Ixell wholly forgot the paper.

He stood there motionless, listening to the clatter of the agitated voice in the receiver. He saw Monsieur Lerouge finally replace the instrument on its hook and look up dazedly, in a sort of awe.

Then, in a hoarse, low voice not his own, the Prefect whispered:

"The — the body of Senator Culadi has just been found in the lake !"

CHAPTER IV

OUT OF THE DARKNESS

THE Quai Woodrow Wilson, bordering Lake Leman in front of the League of Nation's Palace, is too perfect, too enchanting a promenade to be linked with tragedy — if one can forget the supreme, sublime tragedy of the man for whom it was named.

Under its trees strolls the aristocracy of fifty-four nations, presenting a pageant of world-wide scope, brilliant in its distinction. And from it one gazes across the quiet waters of the lake to the immense majesty of the Savoy Alps, now jutting high, high in a mad endeavor to obliterate the stars.

The crude raft which this evening lay moored to the Quai Woodrow Wilson formed a contact between beauty and death. For it bore the body of a distinguished visitor in Geneva, a delegate to the League of Nations' imminent session — the body of the Italian senator, Enrico Culadi.

When the department automobile brought Barron Ixell and Monsieur Aristide Lerouge to the quai, a silent crowd had already gathered under the trees. Occasionally one heard a questioning whisper; but

most voices ventured no sound. What, after all, was there to say in the presence of this latest atrocity committed by Geneva's Nemesis ? . . .

The body was hidden under a voluminous sheet of tarpaulin. At the Prefect's request, this was lifted, and Ixell had a glimpse of the dead man — an appalling glimpse.

He was bound to the raft on his back, as if he had been crucified upon it.

"Put the sheet down," quietly directed Monsieur Lerouge. He turned. Four detectives, several uniformed *agents,* and the medical examiner — all of whom had preceded him to the quai — confronted him.

He did not immediately address any of them, however, for a slip of paper was being thrust into his hand. A paper bearing words familiarly printed in bold, heavy strokes. . .

"This," a detective told him, "was found pinned to the body."

Monsieur Lerouge nodded stiffly. He glanced at Barron Ixell and noticed that the American's countenance somehow appeared years older than it had seemed at the Prefecture. Odd little lines had crept about the lips; a straight cleft had risen between the eyes.

They read the note together:

It was our intention to return Wladimir Cherka to you in this manner tonight, as a protest against your delay in acquiescence.

Unfortunately Senator Culadi died from an overdose of

chloroform, as your medical examiner will discover, and so we are compelled to send him back in Monsieur Cherka's place. But unless the Government sends a plane along the route of the red line, as we have stipulated, Monsieur Cherka will come to you — dead — *in two days*. And at the same time, of course another visiting diplomat will vanish — the process to continue until our terms are granted. To prevent this —

FOLLOW THE RED LINE

As he slowly folded the note and slipped it into his pocket, Monsieur Lerouge's hand trembled perceptibly. He heard Ixell ask the medical examiner:

"It was chloroform ?"

"So it seems," the doctor gravely admitted. "But I shall have to make an autopsy."

"There is no sign of violence on the body ?"

"None."

"How long," Ixell went on, "has the man been dead ?"

"About twenty hours."

At that the Prefect softly interjected, "Twenty hours ! Then he was killed last night — immediately after being kidnapped !"

"Or *while* being kidnapped," muttered Barron Ixell.

They stared down at the raft, all of them, in a kind of mute, awestruck fascination. It had been roughly constructed of logs lashed together with old rope. The protruding ends of those logs were white, fresh-hacked. Apparently a few thin trees had been felled to serve as Senator Enrico Culadi's floating bier.

The Prefect jerked himself out of the momentary stupor. Of the nearest detective he demanded:

"Where and how was it found ?"

The man replied simply:

"Two fishermen — they are here, M'sieu' — started out to drop their nets up the lake. They saw the raft, uncovered, about a hundred yards from shore. And they towed it here, M'sieu'. That is all."

"Bring those fishermen, please."

But the rugged-featured discoverers of the body could add nothing to the detective's concise account until Barron Ixell asked one of them:

"How long ago did you find the raft ? Please try to be as accurate as possible."

The men considered, held a short consultation. Then they decided:

"About thirty-five minutes ago, M'sieu'. Just about thirty-five minutes, yes."

The criminologist looked down at his watch. It was precisely five minutes of ten. They had sighted the raft, then, at about 9:20.

"And where, exactly," he pressed, "did you first see it ?"

Another mumbled consultation: a bit of mild dispute, of reasoning, and finally of agreement.

"It was floating about a hundred meters from shore at a point directly in front of the Chatillon boat landing, M'sieu'. I remember suggesting that we make for the landing."

"Chatillon — ?" Ixell repeated inquiringly.

"That," explained Monsieur Lerouge, "is the private landing on the estate of Maurice Chatillon."

"I see," said Ixell and thoughtfully looked back at the raft.

Further inquisition elicited no more information, and so at last the Prefect ordered the body of Senator Enrico Culadi to be removed.

As he and Barron Ixell pushed through the crowd toward the waiting automobile, Monsieur Lerouge's massive head was lowered in more profound anxiety than he had experienced in his entire career as chief of Geneva's police. And he had held that position for eleven years.

An interval passed during which he was mentally transported from the Quai Woodrow Wilson. He forgot the American beside him — a very preoccupied American at that instant; forgot the wonders of the night air so heavily laden with the fragrance of a thousand flower gardens; forgot the looming bulk of the League of Nations' Palace on the other side of the street; forgot even himself in thoughts of his Government.

Three days ago it had been necessary to notify Moscow that its representative in Geneva had been kidnapped; this very morning a similar report had been sent to Rome. . . And now Italy must be told that Senator Culadi had been *murdered* in Switzerland!

Bon Dieu, was there no way to insure the safety of the diplomats gathering in Geneva? No way to save Wladimir Cherka from the fate which had been Culadi's? No way to combat the inscrutable criminal force behind the extortive "red line"?

Suddenly Monsieur Lerouge sent a sharp, oblique glance at Barron Ixell.

They were standing beside the automobile now. Ixell frowned at the ground, his hands sinking into the pockets of his grey jacket.

It might have astonished Monsieur Lerouge to know that the criminologist was thinking, among other things, of the phrase, "My dear one — "

The Prefect muttered: "If we could discover just where along the lake that raft was launched !"

At that Barron Ixell started. He was promptly alert.

"I believe we can," he replied quickly. "It is futile to attempt it at night; but we can do it in the morning if you will have a motorboat ready. Can you ascertain the velocity with which the lake water flows toward the Rhone ?"

"The velo — !" The Prefect gaped an instant. "Velocity ?" Then, suddenly beginning to understand, he narrowed his eyes, and they gleamed. "*Parbleu,* Monsieur !" he softly exclaimed. "I see ! Yes, I can obtain that information ! The boat will be ready for you at dawn ! . . . But tonight — ?"

"Tonight — " Ixell paused with his foot on the step of the car, his head bent. "Cherka's chauffeur left a widow, I think ?"

"Eh — ?" Monsieur Lerouge was startled. "Why, yes."

"Will you drop me at her home ?" said Ixell, entering the automobile.

The car rolled away smoothly, the crowd watching

it; it turned and vanished swiftly along the dark, tree-walled street.

"May I ask you why you wish to see the chauffeur's wife?" curiously inquired the Prefect.

In an odd, troubled way Barron Ixell frowned.

"Monsieur," he slowly said, speaking, it seemed, to himself, "there are some old phrases that hold a vast amount of wisdom despite their triteness. *'Cherchez la femme'* I have always believed one of them. Ever since we left Cherka's room I've been wondering about those three affectionate little words, 'My dear one.' Can they, by any chance, imply a bit of romance in the diplomat's life? If they do— Many a shrewd statesman has been brought to disaster by a clever *petite femme.* And though it may be stretching logic to base such cogitations on three small words, they open an avenue of possibilities we ought not to ignore. In a case of this sort we can afford to neglect nothing —even a nebulous fancy. . . Yes, I think the chauffeur's wife may help, Monsieur."

And while they spoke, a man languidly moved away from the tree against which he had been leaning on the Quai Woodrow Wilson—a tree so close to the spot the automobile had lately occupied that he might have overheard a few snatches of conversation before the investigators entered the car.

For a while he walked slowly, until he had emerged from the crowd. Then he began to stride in a rapid, energetic way— going in the direction the car had taken.

CHAPTER V

AN AVENUE BROADENS

MONSIEUR LEROUGE did not accompany Barron Ixell farther than the home of the slain chauffeur's widow, for the crisis of Senator Culadi's death necessitated his presence at the Prefecture.

Ixell, when he made his call, found himself in a room which, though dominated by a stricken woman, was in itself impeccably neat.

Madame Rieux looked at him out of haggard, exhausted eyes. She was not surprised by his untimely visit. Suffering in the past three days had left her insensate to further astonishment. Limp, clad in black, her thin hands clasped in her lap, she sat staring as if nothing in the world could now affect her.

With the life of Wladimir Cherka at stake, with possibly other tragedies to follow, it was necessary to be somewhat ruthless. So Ixell asked directly, though gently:

"Madame, your husband had been in the employ of Monsieur Cherka for several weeks, had he not?"

"Yes." She answered mechanically, in a flat, toneless voice. Her eyes were wide and seemed to gaze beyond the visitor.

"Was it his habit to tell you where he drove from day to day?"

"Yes. . . Yes, he told me always — "

"Do you know, then, whether your husband ever drove Monsieur Cherka to call on ladies — on some one lady in particular, let us say?"

Madame Rieux blinked a little. Her gaze returned from infinite distance to focus itself on Barron Ixell's intent countenance.

"A lady? Why, ye-es — " she murmured. "Yes. Often — in the evenings."

The criminologist bent forward quickly.

"And did your husband ever tell you who the lady was?"

Two thin furrows appeared in Madame Rieux's forehead. She dropped her gaze to the floor and struggled to draw memory through a labyrinth of grief and confusion and dazedness.

Presently she murmured:

"Henri said she lived on — on the Rue Montagnes. Yes, the Rue Montagnes. A Russian lady, he thought — for he took them driving along the lake more than once. Her name. . . No, I don't know it, Monsieur."

Barron Ixell, returning her stare, sensed a queer tingling within himself. He stiffened slightly. The Rue Montagnes!

That, according to the police records, was the small street in which lived the Russian lady, Madame Olga Sitviloff — the woman whom Senator Enrico Culadi had driven home from Lausanne on the evening his tragic kidnapping had occurred!

Could it be she with whom Wladimir Cherka, the other kidnapped statesman, had also been intimate ? . . .

Ixell rose abruptly. He was about to depart; but another query suggested itself.

"Madame," he asked, "did your husband overhear much of their conversation while he drove them ?"

"No-o. No, I don't think so. They were in the car. And besides they always spoke Russian."

All this might be altogether insignificant, Ixell thought; he might be following a road which would lead only to ridiculous futility. That Olga Sitviloff had been on familiar terms with both kidnapped men might itself be an unimportant coincidence — if, indeed, she was the woman Cherka had known. And yet —

"Madame," he said, "you have been of inestimable help. I thank you !"

And he departed.

The widow of Henri Rieux, the chauffeur, occupied four modest rooms on the top floor of an antiquated stone house in the less pretentious half of Geneva. When Ixell emerged from her flat, he stood at the head of a dark staircase.

There he paused a minute, planning the best method of employing the information he had just gleaned.

It had been his intention to visit the quarters of the late Senator Culadi this evening, but this idea Ixell abruptly relinquished. He might achieve a great deal more, he decided, by calling on Madame Olga Sitviloff; by this time she might be home.

That it was almost eleven o'clock did not deter him. Her address, copied from the police records, was in his notebook. He knew that by a visit at this hour he would surprise the Russian lady; might even incommode her.

But Wladimir Cherka had been allotted only two days of life. And in such circumstances the niceties of convention must be abandoned. Hours were far too precious to be sacrificed upon the altar of politeness.

What could be learned from Madame Sitviloff? Perhaps nothing. Perhaps not enough, even, to warrant this visit.

But since Barron Ixell had chosen the only avenue of procedure which this baffling night presented, he was determined to follow it to its end. If at that end he did not find the author of the cruel "red line" conspiracy, he would at least know that he had not left a path in this maze unexplored.

He went down the steps swiftly.

There was no illumination in the old hall; nor was there a carpet. His feet clattered down through the darkness, and at landings he was constrained to pause, groping for the next flight of stairs.

He was at the top of the last flight — with a clear view of the glass-panelled street door — when he abruptly halted. An instant he stared downward. Then, with a gasp, Ixell recoiled against the wall and dodged.

For he saw the figure of a man silhouetted against the glass of that street door — a man whose size was uncertain because of the fact that he stood poised in a

peculiar crouch. The figure jerked up its right arm, held it extended.

Then, from the tip of that outstretched arm, burst a spurt of flame. And through the dark house crashed the roar of a revolver !

CHAPTER VI

OLGA SITVILOFF

THERE are times when instinct is the strongest protective armor in man's possession, and this was such a time.

Barron Ixell's recoil doubtless saved him from the sting of the bullet. As he fell back, he distinctly heard it *plunk* into the plastered wall within six inches of his face.

He staggered a little, recovering his balance. And even before he could straighten, he heard the street door jerked open. Lurching forward, he reached the top of the steps to see his assailant's crouching figure dart out of the house.

Ixell went down those stairs at a perilous, plunging speed. Every muscle in his lithe body was tensed, hard, yet quivering. Within him stormed a sort of desperate chagrin. He hadn't seen that figure clearly, and he wanted just one glimpse of the fugitive — just one !

He came to the bottom so precipitately that he crashed into the door. An instant later he stood out on the sidewalk.

The street was exceedingly narrow and twined up-

hill like a crooked Oriental lane. From it a half dozen alleys jutted off into blackness.

Ixell gaped along its length in sudden dismay. The street was empty !

He ran as far as the corner, peering into every inscrutable alley. But he saw no one. And when finally he stopped, breathless, his raging sense of impotence was aggravated by three throbbing queries:

Who had the man been ? Why had he shot ? How had he known that Ixell — or anyone — had called on Madame Rieux ? . . .

Two minutes later the criminologist entered a little café from whose telephone booth he communicated with the Prefecture of Police.

"Please send a man at once to Number 12 Rue Trefle !" he said.

SHORTLY after eleven o'clock Barron Ixell's taxicab deposited him in front of the imposing apartment house on the Rue Montagnes where lived the Russian lady, Madame Olga Sitviloff.

He retained the cab — with a detective seated in it.

"Apprehend anyone," he directed, "who hovers about; and watch anyone who enters !" For he knew now that to someone his death was desirable.

A few seconds he devoted to an appraisal of the front of the dwelling. It was white, modern, one of those aristocratic edifices which have recently sprouted up to appease the taste of Geneva's heterogeneous aristocracy. The approach to its iron grilled door led through two patches of landscape gardening which

lent the building something of the aspect of a villa.

A *concierge,* admitting the visitor, informed him that Madame Sitviloff resided in Apartment 5 on the second floor. Ixell walked up; and he was still on the stairs when the door of Apartment 5 itself opened. . .

A man emerged — a perfectly groomed gentleman in evening clothes. He was rather tall and heavily molded, with a head of thin blond hair that flowed back from his forehead in an undulating, silken pompadour. Across his stiff white bosom dangled the black ribbon of a monocle; but the glass itself was lost in some pocket.

The gentleman turned to bend over a slender hand extended to him through the door. On its polished fingertips he dropped a gallant little kiss. He said, *"Bon soir,* Madame !" almost musically, then came down the steps.

As he passed Ixell he smiled ingratiatingly and lifted his hat fully six inches — a Continental gentleman without a flaw.

The criminologist stared after him thoughtfully until he had vanished.

"The initials in the hat were A. R.," he reflected as he slowly moved up to Apartment 5.

And a minute later he faced Madame Olga Sitviloff in her remarkable little salon. Faced her, eyed her equanimity narrowly, and wondered how close she was to the inventor of the "red line."

She was a beautiful woman — beautiful in the frigid, pallid way of a Benda mask. She stood almost regally erect, her large black eyes at once fearless and im-

perious. They were constantly flashing, those eyes, as if she was accustomed to using them as daggers to plunge into those she regarded. Her hair, too, was black, vivid. From a part it was tightly drawn down on both sides of her head and coiled low on the back of her neck. And she had sheathed her slender, domineering figure in an evening gown of dazzling silver lace.

When Ixell had presented himself, those beautiful eyes widened momentarily under lifted brows.

"Ah, yes !" she said. "Monsieur Ixell. . . I have read of your coming to Geneva — "

Her voice was deep and firm, flowing from her as a song might flow from a perfectly attuned instrument. She spoke French with an accent that trilled the "r's" and transformed "o" to "aw" — yet succeeded in making it enchanting.

He said a word concerning his late visit, but she interrupted.

"It is nothing, M'sieu' — nothing; if I can be of service — " Her slim hand eloquently waved to a chair. He accepted it. The room, he saw, seemed to be a thing lifted out of an Arabian legend. It was suffused with an orange glow, soft and enthralling, that poured from a floor lamp whose parasol was a pattern of weird symbolic figures. There was a spacious divan loaded with cushions of deep mauve, purple, crimson. A golden dragon crawled upon the door of a grotesque curio cabinet. And the very chair in which he sat had arms that were wriggling ser-

pents, their triangular flat heads inviting the caress of his fingers.

In this setting Madame Sitviloff fitted perfectly. As she sank upon the divan, crossing her shimmering legs, she seemed to become a part of the chamber. Cushions billowed about her, drew her into themselves. And her very smile blended with the roseate light — a smile destined to bewitch and to disarm. . .

"M'sieu' — ?"

"Madame Sitviloff," Ixell said directly, "you were with Senator Culadi yesterday evening just before his disappearance."

Immediately the smile vanished before an earnest frown; she even bit her scarlet lip, and her tones sank to a whisper.

"Yes," she admitted. "Yes. . . It is terrible, M'sieu' !" Her gaze suddenly rose to his. "I am praying that nothing will happen to him !"

Barron Ixell was eyeing the woman keenly, steadily. Very simply he told her that an hour ago Senator Culadi had been taken out of the lake, dead. And when he uttered that news, Madame Sitviloff actually lurched out of the cushions — her eyes dazed circles, her countenance white even in that glow.

"Dead ?" she gasped. "Culadi is *dead ?"*

She stood in front of Ixell, trembling, the silver lace of her gown swishing. And her eyes burned down upon him.

It was fully two minutes before she drooped back among the cushions of the divan. Now she no longer

attempted to smile. She regarded Ixell in a sort of horror.

"When the Senator left you last night, you saw him drive away ?" he asked.

"No !" she said. "Of course not !" That expressive voice flowed now in an agitated, almost hoarse whisper.

Ixell glanced down at the floor. Then: "Madame, you were also acquainted with Monsieur Cherka ?"

He fancied she caught her breath, straightened slightly. But she replied promptly enough, "Why — yes — "

"Then you knew both kidnapped men. And knowing them, can you think of anyone who might have been aware of their movements ? Anyone who might have known, for example, that last night Senator Culadi would be driving home from your house ? Or that Monsieur Cherka, a few days ago, would be on his way home from the Comtesse de Vieumont's garden fête at two o'clock in the morning ?"

She did not reply at once. Her thin, straight brows were contracted. It seemed to Barron Ixell that those lustrous eyes were piercing him, searching him; but he encountered them with a narrow, penetrating scrutiny of his own.

At last she said, slowly.

"No, M'sieu', I can think of no one who would know such details." Then, abruptly, she lifted her fine head. "But I have already gone into the whole matter with the police," she added. "They questioned me this

morning, and I told them all I know — which is nothing !"

"I regret having to trouble you again, Madame. But it is necessary. . . Did you, by any chance, attend the Comtesse's fête ?"

"No !" He was conscious of a swift surge of suspicious anger in the woman. He waited, allowing her time to speak; but her resentment subsided, and she eyed him coldly.

"Another thing," he resumed. "Did anyone know that Senator Culadi was driving you home from Lausanne last night ?"

"I cannot tell you that, M'sieu'. Perhaps the senator told some of his friends. *I* told no one."

At that Barron Ixell sighed as if he had exhausted his questions only to have them yield no satisfactory results. He leaned back in his chair, gazing absently at a well-filled ash tray.

And then, as though murmuring subconsciously out of a reverie, he said.

"As I arrived, a gentleman left here — "

"Yes." Madam Sitviloff spoke curtly. The very sharpness of her tone intimated that the friends she chose to entertain had no connection with the matter of interest to the police.

"And was he, too, by any chance, acquainted with either Monsieur Cherka or Senator Culadi ?"

"He knows both men, yes." Real asperity had leapt into her voice. "If it will serve the authorities in any way to know the identity of my guests, the gentle-

man who left here was Doctor Arnold Renheim."

Inwardly Barron Ixell started, though his features remained expressionless. Doctor Renheim! The man whom Monsieur Cherka had driven to the Hotel des Deux Mondes on the night of his disappearance!

A few minutes ago, in this room, the two people had sat who had been the last to see the kidnapped diplomats. . .

What Barron Ixell asked seemed utterly irrelevant:

"Madame, may I inquire how long Doctor Renheim was here this evening?"

"I can't understand how such a thing can possibly be of any interest to you, M'sieu'!"

"Nevertheless, I should very much like to know."

"I have no objection to telling you, but I believe such inquiries are—" She stopped, but Ixell knew she had intended to say, "impertinent." Madame Sitviloff's eyes clouded. "The doctor was here perhaps half an hour," she finished acidly.

"And I take it he smoked the two cigars in that tray—"

That comment, mild and innocuous as it sounded, brought the first and only hint of panic rushing into those brilliant eyes. It was a fleeting look—hardly perceptible. Ixell imagined it came simultaneously with a catch in the woman's breath.

She glanced at the cigar stubs quickly. Two of them, once fat and heavy, now chewed ragged and sear.

He thought she was going to falter, but she astonished him by answering steadily.

"Yes, Doctor Renheim did smoke them. Why do you ask?"

But Ixell preferred not to satisfy her curiosity. He rose. He thanked her for her courtesy in receiving him at this hour, for her willing assistance to the police.

A few minutes later, however, as he sat in the taxi-cab, he was staring at one of the cigar butts — staring and thinking and remembering the sudden panic in Madame Olga Sitviloff's glamorous eyes.

CHAPTER VII

A FEW CHOPPED LOGS

GOVERNMENT TO PAY 5,000,000 FRANCS RANSOM

Sum To Be Delivered By Aeroplane In Effort To Save Russian Diplomat's Life

Monsieur Aristide Lerouge, Prefect of Police in Geneva, announced that at midnight last night he had been authorized, after a special meeting of the Cabinet, to pay the 5,000,000 francs demanded by the kidnappers of Monsieur Wladimir Cherka and Senator Enrico Culadi.

The Cabinet was impelled to this decision, it is believed, by the tragic fate of Senator Culadi, whose body was last night found in Lake Leman.

The Prefect of Police stated that the Cantonal Bank of Geneva had been instructed to transfer the money to him, and that it would leave by aeroplane along the route of the "red line" at 6:30 P. M. to-morrow. Further comment the Prefect refused to make.

THE morning newspapers carried the startling announcement on their front pages; and as the crowds read the news on the quais, the lakefront resembled a gigantic, grotesque parade of huge, white butterflies.

It was a scintillant day. The water of Lake Leman glittered brilliantly under a deluge of blazing sunshine.

On its far shores the mountains loomed blue, tremendous, almost awesome. Geneva was at her summer best, swept by the perfume of full blooming flowers. Along the shore-boulevards the façades of magnificent hotels rose like white castles in some dream city. A dream city, yes; with white steamships sailing out of its harbor like so many white swans.

At a small dock near the bridge across the Rhone, a police launch awaited Barron Ixell.

But, though it was almost ten, the American criminologist had not yet arrived. Five men were at his service, under the command of Inspector Charrine. They waited impatiently, frowning and discussing, in various stages of irritability, the action of the Swiss Government:

"I say it's a crime in itself to surrender to those extorters! If the Cabinet gives in, what guarantee is there that the trick won't be repeated in a week, in a day?"

"But what else is there to do? We have no trace of the kidnappers and no means of finding the diplomat. If the Government doesn't pay, it'll be charged with a hundred forms of neglect."

"And if it does, it'll be charged with allowing itself to be intimidated! Bah! It's preposterous! If a Government is going to show itself weaker than a murderer — "

"The Russian's life *has* to be saved!"

"I never heard of a Government paying — "

"You didn't, eh? What about Mexico? She's paying ransoms day after day — "

"This isn't Mexico."

"Then what about France ? Didn't she pay that Morocco gang just a few months ago ? And what about — "

On and on, while they awaited Barron Ixell.

But of the American there was still no sign. At quarter after ten Monsieur Aristide Lerouge drove down to the dock. He was not to accompany the party in the search for the spot from which the tragic log-raft had been launched; but he wished to see it off, to have a final word with Ixell.

When at last the criminologist came, it was almost ten-thirty.

This morning his was a brisk, energetic figure in golf tweeds. For his tardiness he apologized, explaining that he had made a call on Doctor Arnold Renheim — and others. Furthermore, he had been delayed by the necessity of inspecting Senator Culadi's rooms.

By this news Monsieur Lerouge was not surprised. Over the telephone, earlier in the morning, Barron Ixell had already told him of the startling events of the night.

"I suppose," the Prefect suggested, "Doctor Renheim had little to offer in the way of help ?"

"Only what he had already told the police — little enough."

Monsieur Lerouge grunted; with greater spirit, however, he added, "I have assigned detectives to watch Madame Sitviloff, as you suggested."

"And the *concierge* — ?"

"— was examined this morning. But he has no information of particular importance. He says that many men whom he doesn't know call on the lady. She seems," he finished drily, "to have an unusually large acquaintance among men."

Ixell frowned down at the white launch. After a pause he said, "Monsieur Majerski tells me she is no longer a citizen of Russia."

Now, despite himself, the Prefect was astonished. With some incredulity he exclaimed, "When did you see Majerski?"

"A few minutes ago. I dropped into his hotel. He and Borov were there. They tell me Olga Sitviloff has been banished by the Soviet Government."

"But she is travelling on a Russian passport!"

Ixell shrugged. "Such things can be managed — often are. A few years ago she was quite a notorious character in Moscow — a ruthless terrorist. But like others of the original Reds, she has out-lived her usefulness. . . Well!" Alacrity snapped into his tones. "We had better start. You have learned the velocity of the lake's flow, Monsieur?"

"Ah! Yes. At this time of year, approximately one kilometer an hour."

"Thank you. Then it won't be very far."

And with that opinion Barron Ixell ran down to the waiting launch. In a few seconds its motor sputtered, and it skimmed swiftly away, leaving a broadening wake to sparkle in the sunshine like a jewelled fan.

From the shore Monsieur Aristide Lerouge watched

it, his troubled eyes fixed on the figure in golf clothes. Was that American approaching the man or men who had conceived the crime of the "red line" ? . . .

This the Prefect realized: if the Government was to be spared the humiliation of submitting to extortion, Barron Ixell must accomplish what seemed a hopeless task by the following evening. It was a task which must be performed thoroughly, ending only in the utter annihilation of the criminal power behind the scheme. Else there was no guarantee that the atrocities would not be repeated.

Monsieur Lerouge was frowning when he turned back to his automobile.

"Eh bien," he muttered, "I gave him *carte blanche !"*

THE little launch sped gaily on her quest. In her stern sat Barron Ixell and Inspector Charrine, squinting over the brilliant water. A rather corpulent man, the Inspector, with a savage yellow mustache bristling under a heavy nose. His voice was almost as deep as that of the Russian diplomat, Serge Majerski, but he had a way of controlling and subduing it that rendered it singularly mellow.

"Monsieur," he was saying to the American criminologist, "I have been wondering just where you intend to begin this search. Lake Leman is forty-five miles long — and Monsieur Lerouge told me nothing of your plans."

Ixell had been lighting a cigarette behind cupped hands. He flicked the match into the glistening water and explained:

"What we are seeking primarily, Inspector, is the spot from which Senator Culadi's raft was pushed into the lake. If we find it, we shall probably find, not very far away, the stumps of the trees chopped down to construct that raft. And it is possible that in close proximity to the spot we shall discover the place where Wladimir Cherka is being held — it is just possible!"

Inspector Charrine nodded. "And where do you propose to seek traces of the raft's launching, Monsieur?"

"To the right, I think, of that little peninsula." As he spoke, Ixell pointed to a strip of land at whose very tip rose four splendid poplars. The launch immediately swerved toward the trees.

"Have you any particular reason for believing we'll find the place there?" Charrine muttered, puzzled.

"Rather," Ixell acknowledged crisply. "We're working on this basis, Inspector: It is hardly credible that the raft was launched in daylight. Nobody would be so reckless as to risk being seen from a passing boat. We may assume, then, that the raft was set afloat after dark yesterday — which is to say, after eight o'clock."

"Yes?" The Inspector frowned attentively.

"It was picked up by the two fishermen at about nine-twenty, opposite the Chatillon boat landing. In other words, it was found — if our calculations are correct — about one hour and twenty minutes after being launched. Certainly not more than that, possibly less. . . Now, Inspector, with the lake flowing

at the rate of one kilometer an hour, it is reasonable to suppose that the raft was launched within one and a third kilometers of the Chatillon landing."

The simplicity of it almost made Charrine chuckle. He peered hopefully at the shore line.

Since the west coast of the great lake was, in this vicinity, studded with a string of gem-like white villas, it was logical to turn to the east, where the slopes of the Savoy Alps were densely wooded. And beside a rock which served as an impromptu jetty on this shore the launch stopped.

Ixell, Inspector Charrine, and the four accompanying detectives leaped to the boulder. They were to walk along the banks, while the boat, left to the man at the wheel, slowly trailed them.

And so the hunt for the raft-tracks began.

The brilliance of the day favored them. Its breezy beauty stimulated their optimism. In truth, for the first time since the beginning of the "red line" case, these men felt a stir of confidence. But it was confidence founded, so far, on nothing tangible.

Precisely twenty minutes after the start of the search Inspector Charrine, slightly in advance of the others, abruptly halted. An instant he stared at the ground before him, softly ejaculated, *"Sacre bleu !"* Then he whirled around to cry,

"Here ! Monsieur Ixell, look here !"

Five men answered the call, running to the spot as excitement welled in them. Out on the lake the launch stopped, the man in it rising eagerly.

Barron Ixell, looking at the ground, saw a distinct,

unmistakable track. It was broad and heavy — perhaps six feet in width and characterized by torn sod and crushed wildflowers.

He peered up its length toward the forest wall. Then, "Come!" he snapped. "The next step should not be far!"

He was right. Almost on the brink of the woods, in a shadowed little glen, they discovered a patch of fresh-hacked stumps, not one of them more than six inches in diameter.

The men stopped, gaped about in wonder. Through the foliage above them sunshine dripped like a golden fluid passing through a sieve. It fell to the soft ground, trembled there, so that the glen was alive with little spangles.

Suddenly one of the men whispered, "There! Through the trees, Monsieur — do you see?"

Yes, Ixell had already seen. A small, battered hut . . . a shack used, long since, as a hunters' retreat. . . Instinctively his hand sank into his jacket pocket, where an efficient American automatic lay ready.

The others, on common impulse, gripped their own weapons. That sequestered hut — was that the shelter in which the kidnapped men had been kept? That? So near Geneva?

"Softly!" Ixell directed as they started.

The advance upon that silent hut was in the nature of an attack. What would be found in it, no one could guess. The men scattered slightly, approached from different angles. Some had actually drawn their guns.

From the shack itself issued no sound; nor did it offer any indication of life.

They had less than a hundred yards to climb, yet the ascent among the trees seemed interminable. Barron Ixell, with Inspector Charrine at his side, was the first to reach the door. He looked in — and gaped.

The place was empty! Not only empty, but devoid of any trace of recent occupation! . . .

"Parbleu!" grunted Charrine in disappointment. "There may be some other spot around here. We'll look — "

Ixell nodded. But before resuming the search he entered the hut. He peered about carefully, inquisitively, probing every shadowy corner. Fully five minutes he devoted to what appeared to be a futile investigation.

And then, of a sudden, he picked something up from one of the dark corners.

For a while he eyed it, turning it over and over in his palm, as if his thoughts were drifting elsewhere. And presently he wrapped the thing in paper and dropped it into his pocket, meanwhile gazing wide-eyed through the door.

What he had found was the well-chewed stub of a cigar.

More than that the morning's quest did not yield. . .

CHAPTER VIII

PERPLEXING INTERLUDE

SOMETHING, that evening, was wrong with the lights in the apartment of Madame Olga Sitviloff.

At dusk the lovely lady turned the switch in her exotic little salon, but no light came. She tried the other rooms, only to encounter similar failure.

And so, in annoyance, she summoned the *concierge*. A quarter of an hour that well intentioned man spent in manipulating fuses, grumbling over them, scratching his head — but not in securing illumination. At last he shrugged.

"I can't see what's wrong, Madame."

"Oh !" Madame Sitviloff's slender hand tapped the back of a chair in impatient vexation. "Can't you get someone to fix it ?"

"Well," he decided, it seemed reluctantly, "I can telephone the Emergency Department, yes — "

"Then do it ! Please."

The *concierge* left, profoundly puzzled by the recalcitrant light. After a time he sent half a dozen candles to Madame Sitviloff's apartment, begging her to use these until the summoned electrician arrived.

She did, and with rather happy results. For the

candle glow lent a new charm to her Oriental salon. Indeed, as she sank among the cushions on her divan with a comforting cigarette, she was considering the advisability of some day entertaining by candlelight. Madame Sitviloff was an ardent searcher for "effects."

It was after seven when the electrician arrived.

He spent quite some time over the high-hung fuse box in her apartment. And his occasional grunts indicated that his work was far from satisfactory. Later he went into the cellar but returned again with a puzzled scowl.

Once more he inspected the fuse box. Madame Sitviloff wearied of watching him and went back to her salon. Had it not been for the pleasant effect of the candles, she might have been much more seriously irked.

At last the electrican came to the door.

"Sorry, Madame," he muttered, "but I can't seem to locate the trouble. In the wires, maybe." He glanced at the fuse box over his shoulder and slowly shook his head. "Yes, I guess it must be defective wiring some place — though I can't understand it."

"And can't you *do* anything ?" she demanded.

"No-o. I'm afraid not. That's a job for the wire chief."

"Well, why don't you notify him ?" Her impatience rose again, and she frowned irritably.

"Sorry," the electrician replied. "You can't get the wire chief until morning."

But there was nothing further the man could do, so Madame Sitviloff was left to enjoy her candles for

the evening. To frown at them and conceive unpleasant opinions about Swiss service.

Downstairs the electrician entered the apartment of the *concierge*. He nodded and grinned to two men waiting there — Barron Ixell and Inspector Charrine.

"All fixed, messieurs," he reported. "I had to fuss a lot because she watched me at the beginning; but it's all right now."

"Any danger of her finding it ?" asked the Inspector.

"Hardly, Monsieur. For one thing, in a dark apartment she can't very well see what's lying on top of that high fuse-box. For another, it's a small dictograph and pretty well concealed by the bulk of the box."

"Bien," said the Inspector. "That will be all."

Barron Ixell was already at the corner table, with ear-phones adjusted. It might have dumbfounded Madame Sitviloff to know that the only reason for the failure of her lights to function lay in the fact that a cellar switch had been thrown open. Consequently the house wiring was free to carry down to the *concierge's* apartment whatever an extremely sensitive little dictograph succeeded in gathering.

The criminologist suddenly rose, removing the ear-phones.

"I'll leave it to you, Inspector," he said briskly. "If you wish to reach me at any time, I'll be at my hotel."

And Ixell departed — with the hope that the cunningly installed instrument would offer some further clue to aid in the defeat of the "red line" genius. He doubted Olga Sitviloff. . .

At his hotel he dined, then mounted to his room. He had scarcely entered the chamber, however, when a telephone call linked him with the achievement of the dictograph. For it was Inspector Charrine talking; and the man said:

"Madame Sitviloff just spoke to somebody over the telephone in her apartment. The instrument must be at some distance from the fuse-box, because I caught only an occasional phrase. But what I heard I jotted down. Ready, Monsieur ?"

Ixell had paper and pencil on the telephone table, prepared to copy the Inspector's notes.

"Go on, please."

The desultory phrases and words which Charrine had managed to overhear now spread themselves across Barron Ixell's paper:

"You mustn't come, I say. . . No. . . Police. . . think being watched. . . And don't telephone. . . Who can say ? . . . Time enough to talk. . ."

"That's all, Monsieur," finished Inspector Charrine. "Too bad I couldn't get the rest. But I'll be here myself until midnight; then one of my men will relieve me. Perhaps there will be more later."

"Perhaps," murmured Ixell, staring at the array of phrases. When he replaced the telephone on its hook, however, he doubted very much whether the dictograph would — or could — do more. But this was almost enough ! He knew that he had been following the right road.

It was the road not along but *to* the red line.

In many of Barron Ixell's geographically scattered cases the most active progress had been made in hours of apparent inactivity. And so it was now.

At half-past nine this evening he sat beside his window in a commodious fauteuil. A light, loose dressing gown enwrapped him; a fragrant cigar sent billows of grey smoke curling around his brown hair. With thoughtful eyes he gazed out upon Geneva.

The lake stretched before him, unglimmering this night because of the clouds that had unexpectedly come to obscure the stars. Only vaguely could he discern the mountains. They looked like shapeless patches of black set against a vaster blackness.

But of all this Barron Ixell saw nothing. His mind was focussed inwardly on tremendous problems that needed intricate, painstaking analysis.

In a chair at his side lay the evening newspapers, shrieking the news of the "red line." Their front pages carried pictures of both the dead Senator Culadi and the imperilled Cherka. Culadi's long, dark countenance bore a smile, as if he were ridiculing the tragic columns around him. And Cherka's fine bearded face held a strange serenity, as if no ordeal could affect it.

Ixell gazed through the window and pondered.

All that had occurred since his arrival in Geneva flowed through his mind, arranged itself in a coherent, significant sequence. It was a mental review of events and of people — people who had left indelible impresses on him.

He saw Olga Sitviloff — pallid, erect, beautiful, her large black eyes flaming.

He saw Serge Majerski — lean, cadaverous, with a resonant bass voice; a diplomat who never forgot diplomacy. And with him loomed the dark figure of Cherka's secretary, Nicolai Borov. A young man, oddly ill at ease, tense and jerky in his speech.

Then that blond, heavy, smiling gentleman, Doctor Arnold Renheim. The last man to see Wladimir Cherka. . .

Were these connected with one another only by the obvious, surface bonds of friendship and vocation? Or was there a more subtle, more elusive tie that joined them, collectively, with the fates of Wladimir Cherka and Senator Culadi?

Ixell meditated. Presently his cigar was finished, and he sat with its stub between his fingers and thought.

At 6:30 the next evening an aeroplane was to carry the 5,000,000 francs ransom along the route of the red line. The flight of that plane would commemorate and even celebrate one of the shrewdest criminal triumphs in modern days.

Was there a way to avert that triumph? Was there a means of combating ingenuity with greater ingenuity? . . .

Ixell frowned down at the floor. If, he realized, there were any method of ascertaining approximately where, along the two hundred mile line from Geneva to Zurich, those red flares would be lit —

He bent forward, suddenly, his hands gripped between his knees.

If one could be even *near* those flares, it would be possible to apprehend the man or men responsible for them. But — how to be near them ?

He sat there forgetting time, forgetting the fresh cigar he had taken from a box, forgetting everything save one problem. The hours dragged on, a distant church bell dolorously sounding them. He rose, after a while, and began pacing his room, the unlit cigar protruding from his lips.

His hands were deep in the pockets of his dressing gown. The furrowing frown clung to his forehead, contracting his brows. He thought, planned — and upon these nebulous plans a figure suddenly obtruded itself.

He saw again the silhouette against the door in Madame Rieux's dark house. . . Saw a spurt of flame, heard the thunder of the revolver, the *plunk* of a bullet —

Ixell stopped and stared unseeing at the wall.

It must have been long after two when strange little lights were born in his eyes — inspirational specks that grew brighter and brighter with speeding seconds.

There was, he realized — at least, there *might* be — a way of defeating that amazing bit of criminal chicanery symbolized by the red line on the map of Switzerland !

CHAPTER IX

THE AEROPLANE

AT eleven o'clock the next morning Monsieur Aristide Lerouge had not yet arrived at the Prefecture. It was rumored, among the officials on duty, that he had gone personally to supervise the acquisition of a steel-banded box which, in containing the ransom, would comply with the extorter's directions.

Thus he reflected the attitude of the Swiss Government which did its very utmost to save Wladimir Cherka from the fate which had been Enrico Culadi's.

In the absence of Monsieur Lerouge, the assistant Prefect of Police received Barron Ixell when, shortly after eleven, the American actually rushed into the Prefecture.

He was breathless, and his eyes were eloquent of agitation. But he spoke in a firm, quick, controlled voice:

"Monsieur, can you place at my disposal immediately a dozen men and two fast cars ?"

Astonished though he was, the man at the desk answered with a crispness of his own.

"The cars will be at the door in two minutes. The men are ready." He pressed a desk button and issued concise orders to an attendant. Then, turning back to Ixell, he added, "Did you want Inspector Charrine? I'm afraid he's not in the building."

"Not necessarily," the criminologist said. "But I do want to leave a request for the aviator who takes the plane along the red line!"

"Yes — ?"

"Instruct him to circle around the flares for *at least fifteen minutes* before dropping the box!"

And as he spoke, Monsieur Lerouge entered. Apparently the Prefect had seen the twelve detectives gathering in front of the building, for he demanded immediately:

"What has happened?"

"I'm taking a party of men to Ytonne!" said Ixell.

"Ytonne? *Ytonne?* . . . What's at Ytonne?"

"Possibly the red flares!" The criminologist's hand was already on the door. Both officials were gaping at him. But he told them only, "Messieurs, I hope you will pardon me. We are frightfully late now. We shall have to break all speed laws to arrive in Ytonne on time. I am following an idea which may be utterly wrong — in which case explanations are useless. But if it is right — I'll explain when I return! The cars are waiting, messieurs!"

He was gone. . .

For a moment both men in the office stared rather stupidly at the empty door. Then the Assistant Prefect shrugged.

"Eh bien," he murmured resignedly. "You gave him *carte blanche,* Monsieur."

YTONNE is merely a hamlet lying deep in a narrow valley some hundred and sixty miles from Geneva. Those hundred and sixty miles, Barron Ixell directed as the department cars dashed off, must be negotiated before five o'clock in the afternoon. And so the order was: "All possible speed !"

Had there been a railroad which ran through the town, the authorities might have sent their forces by special train. But Ytonne lies off the routes of travel —a hermit village which has neither grown nor decayed since its mediæval inception. Access to it is gained only by means of a winding, sometimes precipitous road which tourists shun because it seems to lead nowhere in particular by a most roundabout course.

The department cars raced on, for a long time following the western and northern shores of Lake Leman.

Barron Ixell sat beside the chauffeur of the leading automobile. Tense, narrow-eyed, he bent forward. Patently he was indisposed to talk. He glanced back only when other cars were passed; and then it was to dart piercing scrutinies at their occupants.

Tires hissed. A wind hummed and moaned. Had the machines been under the guidance of less experienced chauffeurs, they might a hundred times have catapulted to disaster. For they plunged ahead at a terrific, almost mad speed. Raced in a final attempt

to frustrate the ingenuity of a vicious criminal force.

Swerving from the lake shore, they traversed comparatively level ground until, early in the afternoon, they lunged into the monstrous jumble of the Bernese Alps.

Here, despite all fervor, speed had to be slackened. The roads became too dangerous for a headlong onrush. True, they chose the valley routes. Yet Alpine valleys sometimes lie eight thousand feet above the sea.

The chauffeur of Ixell's car suggested,

"We can make better time by taking the longer way — "

"Take it !"

Up steep mountain roads, twining dizzily around hairpin bends, sometimes skimming the edges of thousand-foot cliffs. Then down, down, down — only to start up again ! About them the mighty heights of eternal snow, beautiful despite their jaggedness. Sombre, sullen, rugged peaks of grey rock jutting two miles into the skies. Glacial slopes glittering like cascades of diamonds. Black, snarling cliffs and crags. The whole world about them heaving itself violently into the clouds !

They passed countless mountain streams that tumbled over rocks in furious, foaming deluges, with spray rising about them in heavy mists. A country of infinite magnificence !

And yet was there a worse spot in the world in which to race against time ?

Watches were snatched out every few minutes.

Ytonne by five ? A hundred and sixty miles of such roads in less than six hours ? It could not be done !

And it wasn't done.

For when the two department automobiles finally charged into the astonished hamlet, it was twenty minutes of six.

Barron Ixell jumped to the ground before the automobiles had fully stopped. He was sorely cramped after the long, arduous ride. So, he realized, were his men. Legs were stiff and heavy, hardly in condition for mountain climbing. Yet some climbing would be inescapable. Perhaps running, too.

Agitated by anxiety and curiosity, the dozen detectives crowded around Ixell. But he did not immediately explain his purpose. Instead he scanned the valley, studied the topography of its surroundings.

Ytonne lay in a sort of crevice between mighty ranges — a valley scarcely more than a deep, narrow gorge. On one side loomed sheer cliffs, surly and forbidding. Their bald faces offered no point from which an aeroplane could be signalled by flares.

But on the other side —

A dense rise of woodland rushed up to meet the angry crags. From the road on which the steaming cars had stopped, the forest extended upward for some two miles — a steep ascent that ended only when it dashed itself against sombre precipices.

Somewhere in that forest, Barron Ixell had reason to believe, flares would be lit to attract the plane — probably from lofty branches of trees. The red line had been traced across the very centre of these woods.

He turned to the men. His terse words were more than instructions; they were part explanation.

"By the air route," he said, "Ytonne is about one hundred and ten miles from Geneva. Consequently the plane which leaves Geneva at six-thirty should pass here shortly before eight — and that is just before dark."

He paused, his narrowed eyes darting from face to face — all of them grim, intent, and ready.

"Messieurs," he said, "it is highly possible that I am wrong. The red flares may not appear in this vicinity at all. But if they *do* — watch the plane! It will circle for fifteen minutes before dropping the box and proceeding on its way to Zurich.

"We are thirteen. We shall separate in six groups and climb up through the forest in a spreading, fan-shaped formation. In that manner we will be scattered over perhaps a mile and a half by the time we are half way up the ascent.

"When you are that high, stop. Stop and watch for the plane! Find a clearance, if possible, from which you can look up. Or else climb a tree. *But watch the plane!* If it circles, go to the spot around which it turns — run; because in that spot you will find a man waiting for the box to be dropped. You will find the red flares. You will find the murderer who drew the red line!"

That was the summary of his instructions. Every man was armed and equipped with an electric flashlight. Not one of them would hesitate to shoot.

Before they departed they were given one final

word: anybody — *anybody* — encountered in the forest was to be seized, flares or no flares !

And then Ixell spoke to the two chauffeurs. They were to hold the cars in readiness. Should they hear shots, they were at once to drive along the road to a point as close to the source of the sounds as possible — there to wait.

"Are you armed ?" the criminologist finished.

They were. They would hold anyone appearing out of the forest who was not of their own party.

And the strange posse started the uncertain climb.

Barron Ixell was accompanied by a gaunt but hardy detective named Friot — a man who displayed amazing agility as they fought their way up the steep, wooded rise. He breathed laboriously, stentoriously, and his eyes were unnaturally bright, but not once did he utter a word of complaint against this form of police duty. It was all part of the job —

Ixell had hoped, in urging speed to Ytonne, to have time for keen exploration and for observance of the road leading to the village. Unfortunately their lateness rendered such things impossible. It would require fully an hour of climbing to attain a point midway up the difficult slope. And time, now, was more precious than ever.

Breathless, they were occasionally constrained to pause for a few moments' rest, leaning against tree trunks. Then up again, up, through brown shadows that grew more sombre with every passing minute.

There was little beauty in this evening's twilight.

Sullen grey clouds, premonitory of rain, were rolling densely over the valley. And from the snow-blanketed mountains came a peculiarly chill wind to sigh through the woods — a wind bringing to summer the recollection of desolate winter.

It was after seven when, having decided that they had climbed midway up the rise, they finally halted. Friot sent his sunken eyes peering through the gloom, and suddenly he whispered:

"There, Monsieur! A little clearance from which we can watch, I think —"

Ixell nodded. He had already discerned the spot, and they mounted to it. A moss-carpeted rock some four feet in height and perhaps twenty in diameter lay there, disputing the domain of the trees.

And here they sat, resting, breathing hard, waiting. . .

They could command an adequate view of the surly skies; and though it was far from time for the aeroplane to appear, they already looked upward, anxiously.

Slowly the clouds darkened. Their vista, as they gazed up from the clearance, was one of black cliffs and grey heavens — cheerless enough. And through the hush of it all unexpectedly flowed the saddest, most forlorn sound Barron Ixell had ever heard. . .

He listened to it in wordless surprise. A song it was — a deep-toned, melancholy melody thrown from mountain to mountain so that it travelled mile after mile, bearing its despondent message.

"An Alpenhorn," murmured Friot, his gaunt head lowered as he heard it. "Calling the end of the day — "

The end of the day . . . the critical day in the case of the "red line." Far away the Alpenhorn moaned its deep, flowing song. And Barron Ixell listened in a sort of spell.

A quarter of eight. Night had almost settled into the valley. Out of the dark, billowing clouds a few raindrops fell — more and more of them until a soft, eerie patter filled the forest.

And with the patter came the drone of an aeroplane's motor !

Barron Ixell sprang up, Detective Friot beside him. They went to the very apex of the slippery rock, balancing themselves there and staring up into the skies. Rain beat upon their lifted faces, coursed down their cheeks in crooked rivulets, but they ignored it. They watched.

A great, winged shadow, flying low, zoomed over the forest. A giant bat silhouetted against the darkening heavens. On the tips of its wings hung lights like jewels.

It passed almost directly over the two men on the rock. It went on in a straight, roaring flight — while Ixell's heart thudded a furious accompaniment to the motor.

Had he calculated correctly ? Would it circle ? Or would it vanish in the night, leaving the men futilely standing in the drenched woods — ?

It became vague. The three jewels were pin-points.

And Ixell's hopes began to sink into despair. The plane was going —

Then of a sudden, the men on the rock saw an uncanny thing. Out of nowhere rose a quivering red glow to paint a burning aura against the heavens! They saw no flare, no fire. Only that vivid color rising from the woods like a crimson haze —

And at the same moment they saw the three jewels, like meteors, turn and dip and begin slowly to circle! . . .

Circling, Barron Ixell knew, over the power who had terrorized Geneva!

CHAPTER X

"FOLLOW THE RED LINE!"

NOM D'UN NOM!" gasped Detective Friot and turned to discover that the American criminologist had already leaped from the rock. The officer followed with a tremendous bound.

They would not be the first to reach the flares. Doubtless others of their party were nearer the spot over which the plane hovered. Yet they dashed through the woods as if all depended on their own attaining the point before anyone else.

It was a strenuous and perilous run, though they moved neither downhill nor up. Their flashlights plunged golden beams ahead of them to light the way through the now black shadows. A thousand times they slipped and stumbled. Twice Friot actually fell, only to bounce up panting:

"It is nothing — nothing. Go on, Monsieur!"

Losing their footing, they crashed into tree trunks, suffered bruises which they disdained in the excitement of the chase. But always they rebounded and dashed on, twining among trees that rose about them like black phantoms.

Ixell was in the lead, but Friot ran less than two yards behind him.

"There, *there!*" suddenly cried the detective, glimpsing the brilliant red glow through rifts in the rain-beaten foliage. "It is straight ahead — only a few hundred metres!"

They plunged on recklessly, flashlights piercing the darkness. All around them was a sort of incessant thunder: the roar of the aeroplane, the clatter of rain.

Again and again Barron Ixell was able to spy his vivid beacon. It was beginning to fade. The flare must be spluttering toward extinction. In a minute there would be a new flare —

Abruptly, then, new sounds burst through the confusion. Sharp, ugly sounds. The cracks of revolvers! . . .

"You hear?" triumphantly yelled Friot. "Some of the others are there!"

The knowledge merely lashed them to greater speed. If there was a gun battle, they would be needed! They ran with a fierce desperation that left them utterly insensate to the rips and bites and scratchings of rough bark.

Six shots — eight — ten. They came in rapid succession. And then — sudden silence!

"They got him!" shouted Friot.

He had scarcely spoken when they lurched into another clearance. Lurched upon a sight that halted them, choked their breaths, rounded their eyes.

In the centre of the place stood a little stone on which burned a crimson flare — as lurid and weird as a sacri-

ficial pagan flame. It flooded the entire clearing with unearthly light. The trees around it were blood-red and trembled like things alive, in terror. The very ground seemd to writhe in the quivering glow. And the raindrops poured through it like a deluge of rubies.

But Ixell and Friot gaped at none of this. They were staring at two men near the flare — two of their own men. One lay prostrate; the other knelt beside him.

It was this second who shouted to them hoarsely:

"We saw the man ! Shot at him and he shot back ! He got Martin here through the leg !"

"Which way did he go ?" Ixell cried, lunging forward.

"Downhill, I think ! I — couldn't follow," the man exclaimed, pointing the direction. "Martin collapsed in my arms — "

And Friot gasped. "Did you recognize him ? Who was it ?"

"I never saw him before !"

Barron Ixell ran to the lower side of the clearance, his flashlight plunging gold along the ground. Two other detectives burst out of the forest, breathless and shouting, their revolvers drawn. In that weird light the group resembled darting demons.

It was less than a minute later when Ixell called sharply:

"Two of you stay with Martin ! Carry him down ! The rest come along !"

"You found a trail ?" ejaculated Friot as he joined the criminologist. For Ixell's flashlight was fastened

on a definite spot under the trees. The answer came crisply:

"Yes! One of our men put a bullet into him!"

Detective Friot gaped down along the beam of light. He saw something else that was red now—a thin, twisting line made of drops—drops. . . They were drops of blood.

"Come along!" snapped Ixell. *"Follow the red line!"*

The descent of the wooded slope proved a task of astonishing facility. For it very soon became evident that the blood marks followed a little forest trail.

Doubtless it was a path fashioned by hunters. Narrow, often insecure, sometimes dangerously precipitate, it nevertheless served its purpose now. Ixell, with two men behind him, went down at amazing speed.

Continuously he seized tree trunks for support, as did the others; else they might several times have plunged headlong into catastrophe. But even moving in this manner, his swiftness was reckless.

He was whipped on, however, by the knowledge that somewhere down the trail was a ruthless criminal. Exactly how far, he could not guess. But the man must be caught!

The flashlight, gripped in his left hand, still revealed occasional red spatterings. They led directly down hill toward the road. When the descent became somewhat less steep, Ixell drew his revolver and fired four shot up through the branches. The sounds were hurled from crag to crag in a *diminuendo* rattle. A signal for the police automobiles—

And the pursuers were within a hundred yards of the road when they detected the purr of a motor. But it wasn't the familiar powerful hum of their own cars. Rather, it was the roar of an automobile racing away — away — into silence —

"Diable !" cried Friot in chagrin. Had they lost the man ?

The aeroplane, meanwhile, had already darted off without dropping the 5,000,000 franc box.

In truth, its aviator had been about to release the case; but down in the flare-lit clearance men stood frantically waving him away. Four times he flew over their heads, and each passing revealed more figures in that hideously illuminated arena. They were agitated and shouting and gesticulating. Precisely what had occurred he could not know; but he did understand that sudden events had crushed a criminal plan. Every lifted arm signalled him not to drop the box.

So he soared up to an altitude of 18,000 feet, in order to avoid high-flung crags looming through the night, and set off toward Zurich, the nearest place to risk a landing in the darkness. There lights would be ready to guide him.

The Government had not yet paid the ransom !

Barron Ixell and the two detectives with him emerged on the road, panting, tense, even infuriated. Ixell was certain the fugitive had escaped by a car of his own — one doubtless kept concealed in some glen off the highway.

And as he stood there, his eyes blazing through the darkness, two blinding, dazzling beams of light

flooded the road. There was an approaching hiss; a moment later one of the police cars stopped in front of him.

"Did you pass any other car ?" he cried.

"No, Monsieur !"

"Then drive ahead — and with every bit of speed you've got ! *Drive !"*

He leaped into the great car. The men who had followed him jumped to the running boards and vaulted into the tonneau without troubling to open the doors.

And then, through the stinging rain, began a historic chase.

It led out of Ytonne's valley. It sent the department car whizzing along a road that rose and fell like a thing contorted. The powerful headlights slashed the night, transformed the rain into a shower of jewels. At turns the chauffeur was compelled to abate that crazy speed, but always, when a stretch of straight road lay ahead, he jammed his relentless toe on the accelerator.

So they travelled for more than five miles before they distinguished the small, swift car in front of them.

"He's there !" yelled Friot and jumped up, his revolver drawn.

Ixell did not stir.

The criminologist's features, revealed by the dashboard lamp in front of him, were grim. The eyes were keen, straining slits. His own automatic was already in his hand, but he made no effort to raise it.

Two hundred yards in front of him — with the dis-

tance steadily diminishing — was the criminal he had been seeking ever since his arrival in Geneva. The man who had conceived the crime of the "red line." . .

Friot's revolver roared. The gaunt detective remained standing, his whole being vibrant as he waited for the department car to overtake the other.

Of a sudden the road curved to sweep along the brink of a mountain lake. One could hear the *swish* of rain on the water. Less than a hundred yards separated the two cars now —

"We'll have him in a minute !" exultantly cried Friot. He aimed carefully and sent two more bullets at the fugitive.

But the police automobile never reached the other.

Perhaps Friot's bullets were to blame. One of them must have gone into a tire of the small car.

Or perhaps, as a result of his loss of blood, the fugitive had at that instant lost consciousness. It might even have been an intended occurrence — the last desperate gesture of a defeated man. . .

Whatever the cause, the small automobile in the glare of the headlights suddenly swerved and skidded. It skidded in a terrible way, crashing violently against a tree; it rebounded, turned over and over like a log, rolled down a slight embankment — *and into the lake !*

A splash that threw up a hissing fountain of black water — that was all. After it, the car had vanished. That lake, like so many others in the high fastnesses of the Alps, sank abruptly and deep.

With an exclamation dying on his lips, Barron Ixell

sprang from his seat. The chauffeur, risking a skid of his own, jammed on his brakes.

And in a moment four white-faced men stood gaping at the black, rain-splashed surface of the water. Only Detective Friot spoke. He whispered, *"Mon Dieu!"*

Silence, then. Utter, deathly silence, with only the *swish* of the rain about them. The lake, as black and forbidding as the Styx, bubbling under the shower. Bubbling as if boiling.

Had it forever swallowed the greatest secret of the "red line" mystery? Friot was thinking that; wondering if the identity of that criminal genius would be lost.

As he thought, long, frightful seconds passed. Seconds like eternities.

Then, with a start, a hoarse voice — the chauffeur's — gasped, "Look! *Look!*"

His shaking finger pointed. They all saw. A hand, half an arm, thrust out of the bubbling blackness. . . A second it struggled, thrashed ineffectually, tried to reach for life. And again it sank.

But before it had entirely disappeared, there was another splash as a long, lithe figure plunged into the lake — Ixell's.

He went down, down, his eyes open and searching, yet unable to see. As he forced himself deeper and deeper, his hands groped. Once he thought he touched something. It felt like hair. But it eluded his grasping fingers. He went down, ever down —

The water began to ring in his ears, to scream. A

tremendous weight came to crush his chest. His temples seemed ready to burst. At that he started upward. Up through what seemed miles of choking blackness. His lungs were ready to explode. Up through topless water that sought to retain him until at last his head burst out of the bubbling surface.

A moment he remained there, gasping and wheezing until he could draw another long breath. Then down again !

From the shore another man leaped. He, too, searched under fathoms for the murderer whom the lake had snatched out of the law's hands.

But eventually both he and Barron Ixell were dragged panting and exhausted out of the water. They sat on the banks, with rain beating down on them. Four strained, pallid countenances staring at the bubbling surface. Minute after minute.

Then Detective Friot whispered:

"Will we never know who he was ? . . ."

CHAPTER XI

THE SECRET OF THE LAKE

THOUGH he was quite as profoundly bewildered as the beautiful woman in his office, Monsieur Aristide Lerouge proved himself not only a sound psychologist but an excellent actor. He pretended deep preoccupation with the papers before him, scowling over them and granting little heed to Madame Olga Sitviloff's obvious terror.

It was eleven o'clock in the morning — the morning after the tragedy at the mountain lake. The rain had ceased; the clouds had been swept away by a mountain wind; and glorious sunshine poured copiously through the window to splash full on the Prefect's brilliantly polished desk.

But to Madame Sitviloff that light was cruel. It revealed too clearly the pallor of her cheeks, the feverish fires in her large black eyes — fires of fear and uncertainty.

"You have no right to hold me here !" she cried with strange hoarseness. "You have no right — "

Monsieur Lerouge merely glanced at her and shrugged his massive shoulders. "You are under arrest, Madame," he said flatly.

"On what grounds ?" she demanded. "You have no cause — no reason — "

"Be good enough to sit down, Madame," he inter-

rupted. And a sudden ringing sharpness in his tone made the woman swallow. "Murder is reason enough !"

She gaped at him emptily, then slowly sank to the chair. Monsieur Lerouge, once more scowling over his papers, appeared to forget her. And there was silence.

In truth, the Prefect was far from confident of his course. He was accepting Barron Ixell's counsel rather blindly, trusting to the American's ability to create something comprehensible out of what seemed chaos.

Of the occurrence at the lakeside he already knew. He knew also that the criminologist had telephoned from Ytonne urging the immediate arrest of Madame Sitviloff. "On the charge of being an accessory before and after the fact in the murders connected with the 'red line'," Ixell had said. "Hold her and tell her nothing !"

So the beautiful Madame Sitviloff had passed a most devastating night in a detention cell.

And now her taut nerves were on the verge of snapping. She sat furious, terrified, stunned — and her remarkable eyes were almost those of a madwoman. It was only by avoiding that blazing gaze of hers that Monsieur Lerouge could preserve his outward equanimity.

Frantically he wished, however, that Barron Ixell would arrive. For the Prefect was himself dazed by the entire affair. Who the criminal was that had been drowned in the lake he could not guess. He felt, somehow, that the American would clarify many

things. Surely he could speak to this vibrant woman who sat alone with the official. So Monsieur Lerouge waited with stifled impatience.

Madame Sitviloff asked a hundred jerky questions, none of which he answered. For Ixell had advised, "Tell her nothing!" And Ixell was conducting the case. Consequently she had been informed not even of the affair at the lake — and she sat in an agony of uncertainty; the kind of uncertainty that made terror a thing of wild suspense.

It was with distinct relief that Monsieur Lerouge at last rose to greet Barron Ixell.

And at the same moment Madame Sitviloff recoiled in her chair, while her slender hand leaped to her throat. Something in Ixell's grim expression — something in the swift, cutting glance he darted at her — whipped her emotions into sudden panic. She sat waiting, waiting. . . Her eyes were round; her breath issued in little spurts. What was it this man knew which had caused her arrest for murder? . . .

"I think," said Ixell in a quiet, curt voice, "we had better conduct this discussion in private, Monsieur Lerouge. Just yourself, Madame Sitviloff, and I."

The Prefect nodded. He motioned to the man at the open door, and they were left alone.

Again a hush — a hush that wrought torment upon the Russian woman's nerves. All night they had been jangled and torn in an odious cell; she was scarcely in condition to encounter a crisis of this sort. Yet it was being forced upon her.

She saw the criminologist sit beside the desk, where

sunlight rushed full upon his strangely stern face. Saw him spread several papers before the Prefect. And then — he began to speak.

A low, firm flow of words, each one of which was a blow upon her heart. Not to her did he speak first, but to Monsieur Lerouge.

"I am going to explain the case of the 'red line,'" he said. "I am going to give Madame Sitviloff the one chance every criminal deserves — the chance of saving her life by telling the truth."

She sprang to her feet, quivering, one hand seizing the back of her chair fiercely. And her voice rose in a shrill cry that was almost a scream:

"What are you doing ? What are you saying ? I have nothing to tell !"

Ixell looked at her steadily, as if to intimate that her interruptions were neither necessary nor desired. There was an unusually stinging quality in his tones as he said:

"Allow me to go on, Madame !"

Strength seemed to ooze out of her slim figure. She sank again, weakly, gaping at him with ever-increasing uncertainty and fear. What did he know ? What was he going to say ? Her fingers began to writhe in the silk of her skirt, with a nervousness she could not quell.

"Monsieur le Prefect," resumed the criminologist, "to outline the case of the 'red line' it is necessary to outline the situation of a man. A man who at one time — not very long ago — enjoyed a position of high political prestige and influence. He held impor-

tant offices and was deemed wholly incorruptible. Unfortunately he was a man of no personal wealth. He had risen to power on the wave of Revolution — not with the help of money.

"The turning point in his life occurred when he consented to betray his Government by dealing secretly with the agent of a foreign espionage system. To this act he was driven by both the desire of wealth and the encouragements of a woman."

"You — !" suddenly cried Olga Sitviloff, choking on the word. "You have no right — !"

"Madame!" Ixell's single admonitory word burst from him like a pistol crack. Before its force the woman trembled a little and seemed to wither.

He looked back at the Prefect's square, spellbound countenance.

"It chanced, unhappily," he went on, "that his disloyalty was suspected by others. And after a time the man became aware of this suspicion. He began to realize that his days of prestige were very soon to end. Once his activities were ascertained — as they doubtless would be — he would be cast out of not only position but even out of his country. As I said, he was personally without means. The future must have loomed very black indeed."

Barron Ixell paused. He had taken a pencil from his pocket. And now, while he turned to peer for an instant at the colorless features of Madame Sitviloff, the pencil scribbled on a slip of paper in front of the Prefect:

So much has just been confessed to me by Nicolai Borov.

An excellent actor, Monsieur Aristide Lerouge; he permitted his scowl to reflect nothing of his astonishment. He merely continued to glower at the pallid woman on the other side of the room.

Barron Ixell cleared his throat.

"To go on," he said, "the woman who encouraged this betrayal of a country was Madame Sitviloff. The alien spy with whom matters were negotiated is Doctor Arnold Renheim."

"That — that's a lie !" suddenly gasped the Russian woman. "That's a — a — "

Ixell's narrow eyes burned into her.

"Madame," he snapped, "you have been brought into this office in order that you may have an opportunity to defend yourself against execution for murder by making a full statement of the *truth !* The 'red line' scheme has been smashed — and that explains your arrest. We were in the woods above Ytonne last night when the flares were lit. The little yellow car in which a getaway was attempted wasn't fast enough for the department automobiles that pursued it !"

The one thing in his speech which crashed fatally upon Madame Olga Sitviloff was the mention of the little yellow car. She started back, unable to speak. Her eyes were circles of horror. She realized now that this man must know everything — that her life lay in his knowledge. He had spoken the unerring truth in his revelations so far; he had been aware even of Doctor Renheim's position. . .

Her eyes stared beyond Ixell — stared into a future that appalled her.

And meanwhile his pencil was making another notation on a slip of paper before him:

Over the dictograph last night Inspector Charrine heard a conversation between this woman and Doctor Renheim. Enough to convince us of the doctor's status in the case — a status which doesn't leave him open to arrest. He personally knows nothing of the "red line."

This he passed to the Prefect. Then, eyeing Madame Sitviloff, he resumed:

"Let us return to the man responsible for the crime. He foresaw his own impending ruin as the result of his connivances with Doctor Renheim, and so he resolved upon a desperate measure. A measure which, by quickly bringing him five million Swiss francs, would render him financially independent regardless of what happened politically.

"He planned the atrocious 'red line' scheme. He knew that the Swiss Government would pay any amount to save the life of the Russian diplomat, Wladimir Cherka. He knew, furthermore, that the Government's action would be hastened if another diplomat, too, were kidnapped. So he attacked Senator Culadi.

"But the senator died as the result of an overdose of chloroform administered during the assault — which constituted the second murder in the case. Madame Sitviloff — "

Suddenly Barron Ixell rose. His own face was grim and white. He went to the centre of the office and glared down at the pallid, shaking woman.

"Madame Sitviloff," he told her, "the criminal genius

behind the 'red line' scheme was — *Wladimir Cherka himself ! . . .*"

That final crushing blow, delivered in a stinging whisper, utterly smashed the woman's nerves. An instant she looked at Barron Ixell out of wide, horrified eyes. One hand started toward her lips but fell again.

And then — Olga Sitviloff lurched forward, unexpectedly, to conceal her face in her hands. A terrible shudder wracked her whole figure. The two men in the office — both on their feet now — saw only her back. It was shaking. Spasm after spasm of choked sobs made it heave spasmodically.

But Ixell had not finished:

"On the night of his own disappearance, Cherka shot and killed his chauffeur. He smashed the panes of his car. He did his utmost to make it seem as if he had been attacked. And all this you knew, Madame Sitviloff ! You knew, because you have constantly been in communication with the man who kidnapped himself ! You realized your own danger only when the police began to question you too closely. And then you told Cherka over the telephone not to call you again — to wait until everything was over — "

To their amazement the woman jumped up, confronted them with blazing, tearless eyes. She was trembling appallingly, and her voice, when she cried out to them, was high-pitched, uncontrolled, even rasping.

This was not the Olga Sitviloff of the exotic Arabian salon; no; this was a woman who had spent a night

in prison, sleepless and harassed by a thousand dreads; a woman who was having tragedy heaped upon her by a man who apparently knew every detail she had thought hidden from the world. A broken, shattered woman. Ready, now that she was clutched by defeat, to fight with every ounce of strength for her own life.

"I *didn't* know!" she screamed. "I *didn't* know he was going to murder his chauffeur! He didn't tell me—"

"And what about Culadi?" Ixell shot at her in a staggering challenge. "What about *him?*"

"How could we know the chloroform would kill him?" she cried, a veritable passion of terror driving her. "How could we know? All I told Cherka was that Culadi would bring me home that night! I didn't do anything more than that! Cherka hid in his car while it was in front of my house—chloroformed him when he entered! He told me he would just leave him bound and gagged in that forest hut—and release him when the Government paid!"

Now that she had started, the truth plunged from her. She could no longer restrain it. It burst out in one wild plea for her own safety.

"But Culadi died! And Cherka had to steal an ax somewhere to make that horrible raft! And—and—I swear I didn't know Culadi would be killed—no more than I knew the chauffeur would be!"

"And yet," said Ixell, "even when you did know, you kept the truth from the police. That is—"

"What else could I do?" she almost shrieked. "What else?"

A second there was stillness in the office while Barron Ixell narrowly eyed her. Then, "I suppose," he said, "Cherka and you were planning to run off somewhere after the whole affair — under assumed names, no doubt — to enjoy the ransom. I suppose he intended to spread a report of his own death, eventually — thus to escape all the unpleasant crises awaiting Wladimir Cherka — "

"Suppose what you like ! I tell you I didn't know he would *murder* — "

"And he was living in Geneva all the time," Ixell muttered, turning to the Prefect. "Living here unrecognized — because he had shaved off his beard and taken a different name ! Living here and watching the Government writhe because of his disappearance ! He was so confident of his disguise that he had the courage even to *call* on Madame Sitviloff ! He bought a little yellow car — "

But Monsieur Lerouge, dumbfounded sank heavily into his seat, his eyes fastened on the pallid, quivering Madame Sitviloff.

Half an hour later, when the woman had been led back to her cell, the Prefect frowned strangely.

"When," he asked slowly, "did you suspect the truth, Monsieur ?"

Ixell regarded his cigarette. "I can't say definitely," he murmured. "You remember there was a nick — a bullet nick — in the frame over the windshield in Cherka's limousine — "

"Yes ?"

"The shape and course of that nick indicated the

bullet had come from the *back* of the car, flying forward. Who had been in the back? As far as we knew, only Doctor Renheim and Cherka."

The Prefect nodded. "Go on, please, Monsieur."

"I didn't know what to think," Ixell confessed. "It was possible, of course, the kidnappers had entered the car and then shot the chauffeur. But it seemed more plausible to believe that if the man had fought assailants, he had struggled *against* their entering — in which case he would have been shot from the outside, not from the back. For a time I was inclined to suspect Renheim's complicity, somehow. Then Madame Sitviloff lied to me about two cigar stubs. She said Doctor Renheim had smoked them in the past half hour. That was obviously false, for the stubs were dry and must have been lying there several hours. Moreover, when I called on the doctor the next morning, we talked and smoked together. And I saw that he didn't *chew* his cigars. Who, then, *had* smoked those two stubs in the woman's apartment?

"Whom was Madame Sitviloff trying to shield with her lie? What was she trying to conceal? . . . When I found another well chewed cigar-stub in the forest hut, her connection with the case became more definitely established."

"H'm," mumbled the Prefect. "Yes — ?"

"I didn't seriously consider Cherka's guilt," Ixell admitted, "until I learned of his friendship with Madame Sitviloff. After that matters began to assume a fantastic yet very possible shape. I imagine Cherka feared my getting just such a notion when he saw me

approach the case through Madame Rieux, for he tried to kill me — "

Only one more query troubled Monsieur Lerouge, and this he muttered after a moment of puzzled silence: "Tell me, Monsieur, how you knew the flares would be set off at Ytonne ?"

Barron Ixell drew a quick, deep breath. "Ah, that !" he said. "Fortunately, Henri Rieux was in the habit of telling his wife where he drove his employer. It seemed evident that in planning the direction of the 'red line,' Cherka must have gone to choose a spot for his flares beforehand. So yesterday morning, Monsieur, before coming to the Prefecture I once more interviewed Madame Rieux. She remembered that her husband had twice driven Wladimir Cherka to Ytonne. To other towns, too, of course — but Ytonne was the only place *within the vicinity of the 'red line.'* Why should the diplomat have gone to so sequestered a village ? . . . I took the only obvious chance on striking the answer ! And it proved the right answer !"

Abruptly Barron Ixell rose. The case of the "red line" was closed. He smiled down at the relieved face of the Prefect of Police.

"You — you are leaving, Monsieur ?" exclaimed Aristide Lerouge in amazement as the American extended his hand and smiled pleasantly.

Barron Ixell nodded.

"As long as we've drawn the truth out of Madame Sitviloff," he replied, "I'm returning to Lucerne — to complete my vacation !"

THE END